



Blaine's
BEAST

AN MM BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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“Forever shall the wolf in me desire the sheep in you.”

— TUOMAS HOLOPAINEN

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Blaine's Beast was originally released as Blaine and the Beast under the author's pre-transition pen name. This story is an MM retelling of the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale with a modern fantasy twist.

Chapter One

Dying had always seemed like a violent experience to me—one moment of the worst kind of fear and then nothing.

Would it hurt?

Would my awareness remain for a few minutes after I died, forced to listen to people talk about me as if I were already gone?

I hadn't imagined I would feel the same as an autumn leaf plucked from a branch by the wind, plummeting in curling motions towards the cold ground. I could feel my body where I'd left it, the gentle pressure of the snow and my brown hair stirring against my forehead in the whistling mountain wind, but I—or my soul—tumbled endlessly in a black void that throbbed with bursts of dim light every time my heart mustered up another beat.

In the fleeting moments of clarity I was awarded as my blood stilled in my veins, I envisioned my funeral. I would be in a suit, my face painted an unnatural tan and my eyes glued shut, and all the people who played a part in my decision to make a deadly escape into mother nature's arms would file past my body, commenting on how peaceful I looked even though they had spent the last few years telling me I was hellbound.

It was fitting in a sense that I had been desperate for warmth at my time of dying. A pit of fire would have been a welcome gift. Even the wolves that had trailed me for what seemed like miles had begun to seem like a better way out than succumbing to the cold.

I had yelled at them once, begging them to finish me off. They had howled back instead, as if encouraging me to carry on in my suffering. The sight of their hot breath pouring in smoky tendrils out of their mouths instead of putting an end to my misery had been enough to make me scream in frustration.

Something touched my face, snapping me out of my thoughts. A hand, warm and soft and tender, caressed my forehead. Then my cheeks, my jaw, and my neck, bringing my frosty skin back to life and leaving a searing wake of pain wherever it touched. The womblike void that pressed in around me thinned out, giving me distant glimpses of my body and the dark-skinned woman who knelt beside it in a flowing violet cloak. My uncovered skin glowed with the same golden light that danced on her fingertips. I could see my chest rising and falling with every breath, each fuller than the last.

The void closed in around me again, but I was back inside my body instead of floating away from it. I was in that strange territory between awake and asleep, drifting in and out of both. Whenever I leaned out of my slumber, something new happened to me.

First, I was vaguely aware of being transported unceremoniously on the back of some kind of animal, then I was out again with unfamiliar voices muttering indistinctly around me, and finally, I was resting in the most comfortable bed I had ever slept in.

* * *

I propped myself up on one elbow, trying to get my bearings as my head spun. I knew somehow I'd been sleeping, but I didn't remember waking up. Yet here I was, nestled in blankets in what appeared to be a bedroom in an old Victorian home. I'd visited them in the past and this one was classic all the way down to the proud wooden architecture, furniture of varying levels of garishness, and peeling wallpaper with black-and-white houndstooth patterns. I hadn't thought there were any homes like this in the area, but here it was.

I swung my feet out over the edge of the bed and pressed my toes into the sheepskin rug beside it. They should've been frostbitten, but they were fine now. Pink, even.

I stood cautiously, unsure of how much faith I could put in my legs. A few baby steps later and I was able to walk around the room. Moving felt good. I got the feeling I'd been in bed for a long time. Days, even. I felt uncomfortably warm and dazed, like I always did when I overslept.

I made my way around the room, investigating the various trinkets and pictures that crowded every surface. A more eclectic assortment couldn't have been formed if every pawn shop and antique store had been sucked into the same tornado. Every piece was entirely unique, shimmering and glistening and dancing in the light from the crackling flames in the fireplace at the foot of the bed.

My gaze traveled across a sea of porcelain kittens in various playful poses and fell on a gold-leafed picture frame, dusty from what seemed like years of neglect. It displayed a poorly made collage, pictures of real people arranged around magazine clippings of words like "love" and "hope."

Among the unfamiliar faces was my rescuer, standing in a sunlit greenhouse that was only half as bright as her smile. She was young, but she still had lines etched around her eyes and mouth from years spent laughing. A pentacle charm hung around her neck, its thin silvery chain vanishing into the abundant dark curls that framed her face like a mane. A witch, maybe. It would explain the healing hands and the whispered incantations I'd heard her praying over me in my sleep.

I'd never actually met a witch in person, and I hadn't exactly believed in magic before. My family and the others in our small, deeply religious town would have banned their kind if they could. Instead, they settled for making sure there was never any doubt that any and all "outsiders" were unwelcome.

I glanced over the others in the collage. There was a young blond man who looked about the same age as me, maybe one or two years shy of my nineteen, standing beside the witch with his arm draped around her neck and a huge grin on his boyish face. There was another man behind him, in his late twenties or early thirties at the most, with dark brown hair and a stern scowl on his face.

Beside them was a weathered man with a magnificent black beard and a turban that was large enough to cast shadows across his wrinkled brow. He sat in a rocking chair on the porch of what I assumed was the Victorian I'd found myself in, a book in his lap and a stack of them on the table beside him. He reminded me of my grandfather—the same gentle expression, the kind eyes, the aura that marked certain people as unconditional havens of safety and warmth.

I had gone into the mountains in the first place to find that. My grandfather lived there in a cabin he had built himself, cutting down the dead trees on his land and carving the trunks and their stumps into works of art. No one had spoken to him in years because he didn't have a phone and never left his property, but I hadn't needed to ask to find out if I was welcome. At least he had no reason to worry about me if he didn't know I was on my way.

"You like my pictures?"

I jumped and spun at the same time, almost losing my balance. My rescuer laughed from the doorway and stepped forward to steady me.

"You're a tiny thing. Like a little bird," she said, looking me over. "You looked taller lying down."

"I know," I muttered as she led me back to bed and coaxed me into sitting. Not that I had a choice. She was sturdy beneath her whimsical clothes. "How long was I asleep?"

"Nearly a week. Long enough for that pretty face of yours to get a hint of stubble. I got rid of it before it could turn into a beard. You don't look like the lumberjack type."

"Got rid of it?"

She winked.

"Are you a witch?"

Her dark eyes twinkled. "A witch? Would that scare you?"

"No."

She seemed satisfied with that. "How are you feeling? Normal? You're lucky you didn't lose your fingers or toes. That was some frostbite you had going on."

"Fine, I guess." Other than the lag from the bizarrely long magic nap, anyway. "I'm kind of tired, though. I feel like I should be more alarmed by... by all this." I waved my hand.

"You were pretty bad off when Mattie and the others found you. Your body needed time to recover, or we would've woken you up before. That's why you're so groggy. I put you into a state of hibernation."

"Right," I mumbled, feeling a slight pang of anxiety that quickly faded. It was hard to feel much at all. "Who's Mattie? And I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

She gave a melodic laugh that filled the room with springtime and more warmth than the fireplace. "Veronica, but everyone around here calls me Vera. It's nice to meet you, Blaine Tucker. As for Mattie, you'll meet him soon."

I must have done a poor job of hiding my surprise, because she laughed again.

"Your driver's license was in your wallet," she said. She nodded to the faded leather square stacked on top of my scarf and jacket, which had been folded and placed neatly on top of a massive dresser with ornate golden handles across the room. "Now, what's a young man like you doing out on his own in the middle of the Hollows in this weather?"

So I wasn't all that far away from town. Not if Vera used the same term all the locals in Tendale used for the thick, purportedly impassible woods my grandfather had chosen to make his home ten years earlier. To be fair, Tendale Forest didn't have the same ominous ring to it. "I was going to my grandfather's house. He lives in a cabin by Storm's Creek."

"You were trying to get up there on foot?" She was giving me a look of surprise similar to the one my mother had worn when she found out I was gay, only there wasn't any judgment in Vera's expression. Just concern.

"I don't have a car, so..."

"I'm sure you've heard the stories. People who go into these woods have a way of not coming back out."

I gulped. "I know. I saw the wolves."

Her face went blank. "Wolves?"

"Yeah. They surrounded me before I blacked out," I murmured. My memory of that night was still hazy. Even though I had just woken up, it felt like it had happened forever ago. The gears in my mind were turning again, albeit slowly. "Hey, how'd you get away from them, anyway? I saw them closing around us... like I was floating above my body."

"There weren't any wolves," she said, frowning. "You must've dreamed it, sweetie. There aren't any wolves around here, anyway. Just coyotes."

"Maybe."

There had been plenty of dreaming between blacking out in that forest and waking up in a warm bed, but most of my dreams were the same mundane stressful adventures that usually plagued me throughout the night. Finding myself back at high school graduation only to trip up the stairs leading to the stage, or sitting around a dinner table surrounded by aunts and uncles arguing about how differently my life would have turned out if my parents had gotten me to therapy "in time."

Howling wolves with teeth that gleamed white under the full moon weren't the kind of thing my subconscious mind usually drummed up to occupy my drowsing hours.

"You must be starving," she said suddenly, looking me over.

To my relief, I was still wearing the same clothes I had left home in, but they had long since dried out and didn't stink like they probably should have. Vera waved a finger in the air and I felt the shift of fabric over my skin. By the time I looked down, I was wearing a freshly pressed white button-down, dark slacks, and Oxfords.

When I looked up, Vera was wearing a smile that stretched all the way across her face. "Can't have you going to dinner in those rags, can we?"

"How did you do that?" I asked, looking down at my hands. The scrapes were gone, but I hadn't looked closely enough upon waking to know whether that was the result of Vera's magic or just the natural healing process.

"Witch, remember?" she replied.

"Right." I went over to the dresser to rummage through my coat.

"Looking for something?"

"Just my phone. Have you seen it?"

"Phone?" She pressed a finger to her lips and seemed to be considering it. "No, can't say that I have. You must have lost it in the snow."

"Is there one here I could use?"

"We don't get reception out here. Electronics in general don't work too well. Satellite interference and all that," she said, waving her hand in the air. "And there are no telephone wires to this place, so no landline."

"Oh. Right, that makes sense," I lied.

Something in her tone told me I wasn't the only one who was lying. I'd seen plenty of houses that were truly off the grid, and they weren't gorgeous, ornate Victorians.

I had never been overly tech-savvy, but even I knew that had nothing to do with satellites. I also knew if Vera was capable of changing my clothes with a flourish of her hand, she was probably capable of doing a lot worse if I pissed her off by calling her a liar.

Sure, she seemed nice, but that meant nothing. My parents seemed nice enough, depending on who you were, but they had still turned me out on the streets in the dead of winter for something I couldn't change. God knew I'd tried.

"Come on," said Vera, linking her arm in mine.

Her flowing skirt rustled against the old hardwood floor as she led me out of the room and into a hallway lit by sconces on the walls. They were set with actual candles, not the cheap LED lights my mother still used because of the one time I'd set fire to the living room curtains as a toddler. Faint piano music echoed through the hallway, carried by the high ceilings.

"What is this place?" I asked, struggling to keep up. Vera was short, but she moved quickly and my lavish surroundings would have been overwhelming to take in even if we were standing still. "It looks like a castle."

"It is," she said, leading me down a spiral staircase that opened up to a vast room that seemed to serve no particular purpose. The downstairs was furnished with the same unnecessarily ornate furniture as the upstairs, and the music was coming from a grand piano stationed by heavy velvet

curtains in a deep shade of violet.

The blond young man from the picture in my room was seated at the bench, his fingers cheerfully dancing across the ivory keys. He looked up when he saw us with a smile as bright as his hair in the candlelight shining from a golden candelabra sitting on top of the piano.

"Hi!" he said cheerfully.

"Uh, hi."

"Blaine, this is Mattie," Vera said, letting my arm fall. "Our resident maestro."

"You play beautifully." It was hard to process the revelation that the music was live. It sounded so perfectly rehearsed and crisp, I'd been sure it was coming through speakers. Then again, there were no speakers here.

His smile broadened. "Thanks! I hope you like Chopin with dinner."

"I don't really know that much about classical music, but I like it all," I admitted.

He looked at Vera as if for permission and she nodded. With a flourish that ran all the way down the keyboard, he ceased playing and stood up, smoothing down his light blue vest. He crossed the room and offered a hand to me, still grinning.

"Well, it's nice to see you awake and thawed out," he said as I shook his hand awkwardly.

I wasn't sure what to make of the implication that he'd seen me when I wasn't awake, but I reminded myself Vera couldn't have taken me to this place on her own. Mattie didn't seem much more substantial. He was lithe but not very tall, and his warm hands seemed a few sizes too big for him.

"Thanks. So, you live here?"

"We all do! Come on, I'll introduce you," he said, motioning for me to follow him further down the hall. When I looked back to see if Vera was following us, she had vanished.

Mattie led me into a huge kitchen that was just as ornate as the rest of the house, but not quite as up-to-date as I would have expected for a house whose owner was obviously loaded. Guess he couldn't be bothered to give his staff new equipment. The bearded man wearing the turban in Vera's collage looked up from a gas stove, giving me a smile as warm as the one he'd been wearing in the picture.

"There's the guest of honor," he said. "We've been hoping you'd join us soon."

Guest of honor? I smiled sheepishly, taking his hand when he offered it. "I hope you didn't do anything special on my account."

"Nonsense. It's not every day we get visitors out here," he said, giving my hand a few firm pumps before letting it fall. "I see Vera patched you up."

"She's been very kind. Thank you," I said, looking between him and Mattie. "I'd be dead if you hadn't taken me in."

"I'm sure there was a reason our paths crossed," he said with an easy smile. "Aavai. It's a pleasure to

meet you, Blaine."

"The pleasure's all mine." For the first time since coming to the castle, I felt at ease. Aavai had a calming presence that reminded me even more of my grandfather in person. "Can I help you with dinner?"

"Nonsense. You're still recovering and the lord of the house will be down soon."

"Lord?" I echoed warily.

Aavai and Mattie exchanged a look. "Show our friend into the dining room, won't you?" Aavai asked kindly.

"Sure!" Mattie took my arm and pulled me through a pair of swinging doors and into a dining room that was even more lavish than the rest of the house with a vaulted ceiling, gold trim and candles everywhere. The long table was set for seven with beautiful white-and-blue floral china that was certainly a cut above the mismatched plates and bowls my parents had owned as long as I'd been alive. I'd only ever seen dishes like those in display cabinets. It was weird to imagine actually using them.

I took a seat at Mattie's insistence and had that same awkward feeling of being the only one wearing a costume at a Halloween party. "Are you sure there's nothing I can do?"

"Yep!" He plopped down in the chair next to me and just watched me with his hands folded in his lap and that pleasant if somewhat blank smile plastered on his face. I had a bad feeling he would have been perfectly content to stay that way if the door hadn't swung open, letting in a gust of cold air and snow along with a burly man in a heavy black coat whose shaggy brown hair brushed the top of the door.

"Cold enough to freeze your balls off out there," the tall man muttered under his breath. His nose wrinkled and he looked up, his eyes locking on me. "Oh. You're awake."

"Hi," I said sheepishly. I recognized him as the surly guy next to Mattie in the photograph almost immediately. Was he the "lord" of the house?

He shrugged out of his jacket and Mattie leaped up to take it. He was wearing a thick red flannel shirt and he had a heavy layer of stubble growing along his strong jaw. He didn't look like a lord, but the way Mattie was fawning over him made me second guess that assumption.

"I'm Blaine," I said.

"I know who you are," he said with a lopsided grin. "The name's Birch. I'm the one who hauled your ass back here ten miles through the snow."

"Thanks," I murmured, confused. I'd sworn an animal, maybe a horse, had transported me. But I wasn't about to start asking questions again. "And sorry about that."

"Don't mention it," he said with a twinkle in his eye. His smile faded as he looked between me and Mattie. "Where is he?" The way he used the pronoun made it seem like a euphemism.

"He hasn't been down here yet," Mattie said in a way that made me think his remark carried some

additional information I wasn't meant to understand. "Aavai said dinner should be ready in a few minutes, though."

Birch gave a grunt of acknowledgment. "I'll go tell him."

Once the other man had disappeared up the stairs, I turned back to Mattie. "Is he talking about the one who owns this castle?"

Mattie seemed about to answer when there was a loud clatter from the kitchen. He winced. "I'd better go see if Aavai needs any help."

"Can I help?"

"No, just relax!" he called before breezing through the doors.

I slumped back in my high-back chair and sighed. Maybe I really had died in those woods and this was all some bizarre hallucination. I just wasn't sure yet if I was in heaven or somewhere worse.

Chapter Two

Dinner was every bit as flamboyant as the rest of the castle. There were seven full courses, most of them I couldn't even pronounce, but it all smelled amazing. I could only hope the others couldn't hear my stomach growling, but Mattie's snickering suggested otherwise.

Vera took the seat next to me, which left two places unoccupied, including the head of the table to my right and the seat next to it on the other side. I found myself growing more nervous to meet this supposed lord the more time elapsed without him showing up.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs that led directly into the dining room drew everyone's attention, but Birch was the only one who appeared. "He said to go ahead and start without him," he announced, pulling back the chair next to Mattie before collapsing in his seat and filling his plate.

Aavai and Mattie both bowed their heads and seemed to be praying silently. I was used to my family's loud prayers before every meal, most of them laced with a pointed criticism directed at me, but Vera and Birch started eating immediately. I waited until Aavai took his first bite before taking a bite of my bread, forcing myself to keep a civilized pace even though my stomach's emptiness had been all I could think of for the last few minutes.

"This is amazing," I said, glancing over at Aavai. "Are you a chef?"

He gave a big, warm laugh. "More or less, but I'm not formally trained."

"Could've fooled me."

"Aavai's the best," Mattie said proudly while his seat mate shoveled food into his mouth like a wild dog. Looked like I wasn't the only one who was starving. "He's teaching me."

"So you all live here?" I asked, hoping to piece together what I could over dinner. Aside from Vera, they all seemed to have some service-oriented role, but they acted more like a family than coworkers.

"For quite a long time," Aavai said, his tone strangely solemn. Even Birch stopped eating quite as enthusiastically.

"I've lived here most of my life," Mattie said softly. "My parents used to work here."

"Where are they now?" I regretted asking even before the words were out of my mouth. Birch shot me a dirty look. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"It's fine," Mattie said, his smile firmly in place. "It's been a few years. It was an accident, but our, um, lord let me stay here and Aavai sort of adopted me."

"A full-time job, to be sure," the older man said with the utmost affection.

Birch snorted in agreement.

"What do you do?" I asked Birch, hoping to find a way to make amends. He was far too intimidating of a person to make an enemy out of.

"Security," was his only answer before he shoveled another forkful of food into his mouth.

"We certainly don't keep you around for your etiquette," Vera said in a dry tone, taking a sip of her wine.

"Are you the lord's wife?" I asked curiously. That would explain the way she carried herself, her head held high and her steps sure. The blank look on her face made me think otherwise. Soon, the entire table erupted in laughter.

"No, and if I were a praying woman, I'd thank God for that every day," she said with a little giggle as she finished off her wine.

My face grew warm, but the way the table fell silent all at once replaced my embarrassment with concern.

I followed their gazes to the tall man at the bottom of the stairs who was watching me with a look just shy of contempt. He wasn't as burly as Birch, but there was something about his energy that made him even more imposing—not to mention his regal appearance. He wore a black collared shirt, and his dark hair cascaded over his broad shoulders, framing his hard, chiseled face.

There was clear scorn in his amber eyes as his gaze passed over me, and I found myself overcome with the urge to ask Vera to change seats with me when he pulled out the chair at the head of the table and sat down.

Without a word, he filled his plate and started eating. I waited for an introduction or an explanation, but the others all turned back to their own plates. All traces of the merriment that had filled the room moments earlier disappeared.

As dinner wore on, there were snippets of small talk here and there, but it felt forced. In my early life, I had realized there were certain people who were capable of sucking every ounce of joy and life from a room. My own father was one of them. While the silent lord seemed more brooding than overtly abusive toward his servants, the division between them was clear. If they were a family, it certainly didn't seem like he was part of it.

I felt a twinge of guilt for jumping to conclusions. After all, directly or indirectly, this man had played a role in saving my life by offering me shelter. I at least owed him the benefit of the doubt. Besides, if he lived all the way out in the Hollows, he probably didn't enjoy having company. Maybe he was just in a bad mood because of my presence. I decided to try making small talk in hopes that I'd get the chance to properly thank him.

"You have a beautiful home," I began, since that seemed like the safest place to start.

He looked up from the table and seemed surprised I had spoken to him at all. After glancing around, he turned back to me and muttered something I couldn't quite make out in acknowledgement.

So he was the strong, silent type. Nothing wrong with that.

"Thank you for letting me stay here," I continued. "I promise I'll be out of your hair as soon as I find a way to get in touch with my grandfather."

The idle chatter at the other end of the table stopped immediately and I glanced over to realize everyone was staring at us. Their wide eyes quickly darted elsewhere, and Vera made a half-hearted remark to Aavai about how well-seasoned the green beans were.

"No one is going anywhere in this storm," the lord said gruffly.

"Are we far from town?" I asked warily.

His dark gaze flitted over me like he was searching for something and his mouth thinned into an even more unrelenting line. "Very."

I took a sip of my wine, which felt weird considering I wasn't twenty-one yet. Then again, Mattie had a glass and I doubted he was older than that. My hand was trembling almost as badly as it had when the cold set in, and when I reached to set my glass down behind my plate, it toppled over.

The lord's hand shot out before I could grab the glass and he caught it without spilling a drop. Our eyes met and my mouth fell open.

"I-I'm so sorry... um... my lord."

He frowned, but this time his expression was far more curious than irritated. He set my glass back down and propped his head on his hand. "Lord?" He glanced at his servants, who were conveniently engrossed in their food.

"You're not one?" I asked carefully.

"I suppose that title's the rough equivalent," he muttered, looking me over once more. "Your name is Blaine, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Nice catch."

A ghost of a smile graced his lips. "Why were you out that far in the woods? You can't be more than, what, eighteen?"

"Nineteen," I said. The bored look on his face made it clear he was less than impressed by the difference in maturity. "I was trying to get to my grandfather."

"In the Hollows?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yeah. He's...kind of eccentric." I cringed. "Not that he's eccentric just because he lives out here, I mean. There are other reasons."

The people in town—including the others in my family—used terms that were far less kind, but my grandfather's strange ways had always made him a hero to me. In my town, there were only a few things a man could plan to be in life without losing the approval of his kin. Husband, father, farmer, miner, factory worker.

None of those paths had ever appealed to me, at least not in the narrow context I was expected to live them out, but my grandfather had always walked to the beat of his own drummer. Despite the fact that his artwork had kept his family fed and clothed for years, they mocked him, but his works were the most magical things I'd ever seen, and no amount of growing up had changed my mind on the matter.

"Well, wherever he lives, he's far away. There's no one around for miles and we don't get cell service up here."

"Vera told me," I murmured. "You don't have a landline? Don't you ever need to make calls?"

"No." It quickly became clear that was the only explanation I was going to get. "This grandfather of yours," he continued, taking a sip of his wine. "What does he do in the woods?"

"He carves things. Wall hangings, mostly," I replied. "He used to be a lumberjack, so he cuts down dead trees and repurposes them as art. Maybe as penance for all the trees he killed, I don't know."

"Hm. Interesting."

His tone seemed genuine and he had no reason to humor me, as I reminded myself. "I'm not explaining it well, but they're really beautiful. He'd love this place," I said, looking around at all the ornate wood carvings both in the structure of the room and the furniture that adorned it.

"My mother chose the furniture years ago," he murmured, swilling the deep burgundy liquid in his glass. "She liked that sort of thing."

"She had good taste."

He looked up. I was worried I'd made another faux pas until the ghost of a smile graced his hardened face. "Surely there are more efficient ways you could have gotten to your grandfather's house than on foot."

"I didn't really have a choice," I admitted. When I realized he was waiting expectantly for me to continue, I added, "My family kicked me out."

"In the middle of the night without transportation?"

"They were upset. We, um, got into a fight."

He frowned. "About what?"

I realized I probably sounded like some kind of delinquent and might well be in danger of getting kicked out again. I wasn't crazy about the prospect of outing myself to strangers, especially since people tended to react poorly to that where I was from, but I was too overwhelmed and exhausted to think up a fitting lie.

"They found out about my boyfriend," I said at length. "It didn't go well."

"Boyfriend?" Mattie echoed, suddenly interjecting himself in the conversation even though he'd been talking to Birch a moment earlier.

"My ex now," I said warily.

"That's a pitiful reason to throw your child out," the lord muttered.

I let out a slow breath in relief. So I was surrounded by weirdos, but at least they weren't homophobic weirdos. Not that I had room to talk about weird. "Yeah, I guess it is."

"And your grandfather, is he as bad as them?"

"No, he's wonderful," I said earnestly. "He's nothing like them. Sometimes I don't know how my father came from him."

The lord chuffed, a sound I was beginning to realize denoted his agreement.

Then something across the table drew his attention, and the scowl that had been there the first moment I'd met him returned with a vengeance. The others had fallen silent again, and they were all staring at us with hopeful expressions like a bunch of dogs waiting for someone to drop a morsel by their feet. They looked away quickly when they realized they were caught, but whatever damage there was to do was already done.

Their lord—or whatever he really was—pushed his chair out, slamming his hands on the table. He turned to stalk up the stairs, and this time it was *his* wine glass that toppled over.

I reached out to right the glass, but what was left of the wine was already soaking into the pristine white tablecloth. I dabbed at it with my napkin and looked up when Vera's hand closed over mine.

"It's all right, sweetheart," she said gently. "We'll take care of this."

I hesitated, looking up at the empty stairwell. "Is he okay?"

"You could go find out," she said, her hopeful expression returning as she clutched the stained napkin in her hands. The others were all watching me with that same look in their eyes. Even Birch.

"Okay," I said warily, backing away from the table.

I ascended the stairs, deciding that going after the moody noble was only slightly less unnerving than staying in that dining room another second. If I hadn't just seen them all eat, with the way they were looking at me, I might have been concerned that I was the next thing on the menu.

As nice as they were, there was something strange about them. Something even stranger than the man they served. At least his quirks could be explained away by being a moody rich guy who lived in the woods.

My confidence ebbed away the closer I got to the top of the stairs. The upstairs hallway was darker than it had been, and I realized a few of the candles had gone out. I crept further down the hall despite realizing I had no idea where the lord was, let alone what to do when I found him. Why his servants thought I could calm him down when he obviously didn't want me there in the first place was beyond me, but I was far more afraid of the petite witch than I wanted to admit.

I heard someone moving around in one of the rooms at the end of the hall and saw the door was open. The flickering sliver of light peeking through the crack suggested the room was lit with candlelight as well. My hopes of finding a secret phone or some other electronic device I could use to communicate with the outside world were dwindling more by the moment.

I hesitated at the door, trying to come up with some excuse for being there. Somehow, I got the feeling telling him his servants wanted me to check on him wasn't going to improve his mood any. I reached for the door and was still summoning the courage to knock when it flew open, revealing the lord on the other side. His nostrils flared in agitation and he watched me with wide, feral eyes, although this time, the cause of his resentment was no mystery. Now I was intruding on his home and his privacy.

"What do you want?" he demanded, his voice rough and rigid. There was something else in it, something that tingled at the base of my spine and made every hair on my body stand on end.

"I'm sorry, I just..."

I trailed off when I realized I didn't have an answer. I'd wanted to get out of that dining room, but I couldn't admit that without offending him and the people who had saved my life. I swallowed hard.

"I just wanted to apologize," I said. "I can tell you don't like having people here, and I know I'm a burden, but I'm really sorry if I did or said anything at dinner to upset you."

He listened in silence, seeming more confused than angry by that point. Then he blew a puff of air through his nostrils and stepped back enough that I could see into the room. It was even more lavish than the rest of the castle, if possible. There was a massive wooden canopy bed draped in exotic silks of every dark shade, and some intoxicating incense was smoking from a censer hanging over the vanity. The only thing out of place in the room at all was a splintered piece of wood sticking up from the vanity where a mirror seemed like it would naturally belong.

"You didn't do anything," he muttered, almost under his breath. "The matter is between my servants and myself."

His answer should have come as a relief, but it wasn't one. "Is it because they brought me here?"

He frowned. "What does it matter?"

"I'd just hate for them to be punished because of me," I said. "I'm sorry I ended up here. If you want me to leave now—"

"Punished?" he echoed, ignoring the rest. He folded his arms and leaned in the doorway. "What do you take me for, exactly?"

Another question I didn't quite know how to answer. A cranky rich man at best, an abusive tyrant at worst. My opinions had fluctuated throughout the night, but I was even further away from settling on one than I ever had been.

He sighed and rolled his eyes, stepping back into the room. "Come in."

It wasn't so much an invitation as a command, and I found myself overwhelmed by the urge to obey. Not just the urge—the need. The heady fragrance of the incense was making me dizzy and coupling

with the fear of being alone with a strange man who was unlike anyone I'd ever met in my life.

"Wow," I breathed, stumbling on the edge of a red Persian rug.

The lord caught me in his arms, and I realized he was every bit as strong and solid as he seemed. His arms closed around my waist, and I found myself wrapped in warmth and staring into those piercing, unreadable eyes.

Only this time, there was at least one emotion in them I could read loud and clear. Lust was unmistakable, if only because I had seen it in Brad's eyes more times than I cared to count.

At first, the fact that a cop was interested in me had been flattering, but I had broken things off when it became clear he wasn't willing to go at my pace. Somehow, a moment in the stranger's arms was stirring more desire than three months of dating Brad in secret had.

"I'm sorry," I murmured. The words were almost an automatic response by that point, and the only ones that had ever been safe to speak without fail. I didn't know what I was apologizing for, but it didn't matter as long as those eyes held me in thrall.

The lord lowered his gaze and I could feel it burning on my lips. The door had long since fallen shut and I realized we were completely alone. Even more troubling was how little that fact bothered me.

"You're not very coordinated, are you?" he asked.

It wasn't the first time I'd been called clumsy, but never in terms other than scolding.

He put me back on my feet and I felt cold the moment he broke contact. My traitorous body craved the warmth and friction of being pressed close to a man I didn't even know. What little I did know of him should have pushed me away, out that door, maybe even out of the castle itself. The wintry world outside was far warmer than the ice within his eyes, but something held me there, transfixed in his gaze and in his presence. I didn't want to leave. I wasn't even sure I *wanted* to want to.

His hands wrapped around my arms, a bit too tight, like he wasn't quite aware of the pressure his touch exerted. My breath caught in my throat as he leaned in and his scent mingled with the incense in the headiest of blends, masculine and ethereal at once.

His lips met mine, and I gasped but found myself returning the kiss eagerly. Not nearly as eagerly as he clutched me to him, shoving his tongue into my mouth, but still. The overt aggression was something I was used to since my ex was about as macho as they came, but I wasn't expecting the growling. I felt the vibrations on my lips as his hands explored my waist, his nails dragging against my bare skin underneath my shirt.

The fine shirt Vera had poofed into existence was shredded before I fully knew what was happening. I thought I caught a glimpse of fabric strips torn impossibly fast on the floor as he led me over to the bed, but his kiss was too mesmerizing to think much about it. His embrace was a hurricane, encompassing me and spinning me around inside until I could hardly remember which way was up or why it mattered. All I knew was that I wanted more of it. And more was something he seemed fully prepared to give.

My heart skipped nervously, and somehow, he seemed to sense my apprehension. He slowed down

and the look in his amber eyes made it clear that was a feat of great effort for him. His hands groped my flesh at a slower pace and he took more care with my pants. I was pretty sure he'd popped a button getting them off, but at least they made it to the floor in one piece along with my boxer briefs.

As he laid me back against the covers, his hands trembling against my flushed skin with the effort of restraint, I was caught between lust and fear.

Lust because I'd never felt such a strong reaction to another human being as the one lowering his muscular frame on top of me, heavy and solid like a tree but warm and smooth everywhere other than the dark hair covering his chest and trailing down his sculpted torso.

Fear because my virginal status and reluctance to give it up was the primary reason Brad and I had broken up. Somehow, in this stranger's arms, I was willing to go further than I ever had with a man I'd known for years.

I realized he was watching me and all the self-consciousness I'd somehow forgotten in the whirlwind of passion dropped in on me at once. His glorious hair and chiseled features just made the contrast to my plain boyishness even more absurd. I had always been a scrawny nerd, and my family had given up on telling me I'd grow out of it one day when I'd started college. I thought I'd made peace with the fact that no miraculous secondary growth spurt was coming to save me from eternal twinkdom, but before I could spiral all the way down into the pit of self-loathing, the look on my unexpected lover's face made me think twice.

So did the growl of approval coming from his throat. It was almost a purr. I might have asked him how he was making that sound and what I was supposed to make of it if I'd been able to do anything other than stare at the thick shaft he had just freed from his pants.

So he was proportionately huge all over.

Fuck.

I swallowed and it was more audible than I'd thought, judging from the slow smile spreading across his face. I squirmed a little further up the bed and he crawled over me, reaching down to run a rough hand up along the inside of my thigh. The touch made me shiver, and I gasped when his finger slipped between the cleft of my cheeks. I was worried he planned to start prepping me without lube when he paused and seemed to be considering the resistance even the tip of his finger was met with. He reached into a table beside the bed and pulled out what looked like a glass bottle of oil—certainly not one of the branded lubricants I had never been brave enough to pick up at the supermarket for my own experimentation—and slicked a thin coating over his middle two fingers.

"Relax." It was another order, low and gruff as his hand slipped between my legs again. I closed my knees out of some strange sense of modesty, even though he'd already seen everything there was to see, and he unceremoniously pushed them open with his free hand. The oil was warm on his fingers as he traced a ring around my tight hole, and I found myself relaxing against the many pillows strewn at the top of his bed.

"Be careful," I mumbled.

He gave a grunt of acknowledgement and slipped a finger in past the first knuckle. His touch was

warm and rough, but the lubricant helped his finger slide in without more than a faint ache. I had fucked myself with my fingers plenty of times, usually in the shower while my hand was wet, but I'd never been able to get more than a fingertip in, and having someone else do it was a different matter entirely. I'd let Brad do it once and never again when he'd made it clear I wasn't relaxing quickly enough for his liking.

This time, something was different. My body relaxed on its own as the stranger's finger brushed against my spot, stroking and eliciting sensations I'd never felt before. I bit my lip to keep the whimper in my throat at bay and felt myself tense up a little as his second finger went all the way in, buried in my ass up to his last knuckle. I waited for him to scold me for tightening up, but the way he slowly withdrew his fingers was almost worse.

Before I could protest the abandonment of the touch I had only just begun to enjoy, he lowered himself between my legs, spreading them even further apart. I watched in a mixture of horror and fascination as his head disappeared between my legs and I felt his tongue at my entrance, gliding the tip around the tight ring of muscle at my hole like he'd done with his fingers moments earlier.

"Y-you don't need to..."

He quieted me with a gruff noise and pushed his tongue inside my ass, making me cry out in pleasant surprise.

Fuck, that felt good. With his tongue stroking the same spot his fingers had found so easily, my cock was fully erect, flopping back against my stomach as he grabbed my hips and lifted me for easier access. My breaths grew shallow as he kept going, his own breath hot and heavy against my most sensitive region. I felt myself on the verge of coming, but I couldn't manage to put the thought into an audible warning.

Somehow, he knew and he stopped the sweet torture he was meting out with his tongue only to settle between my legs. He reached for the bottle again and stroked his hand over his shaft until it gleamed, but I was so wet from his fingers and tongue that I doubted it was even necessary.

I'd never wanted anything more than I wanted his cock buried inside of me, and I wasn't above begging for it, but he seemed to understand perfectly. He turned me onto my stomach and adjusted my hips so I was resting on my knees, my legs spread apart and the sensitive head of my cock brushing against his silk bed coverings. I whimpered in need as he positioned himself at my entrance, and even though it hurt when he managed to push the tip inside, I was ready for both the pleasure and the pain. My fingers gripped the blankets as he pushed further into me, wrapping an arm around my waist as he thrust into me to keep me in place.

"Fuck," I gasped as he filled me all at once. Even though I'd seen how thick he was, feeling his heavy shaft stretching me open, his pulse throbbing against my inner walls, was an entirely different thing. It ached, but it didn't hurt quite as bad as I'd always thought it would.

Then again, it was hard to imagine that any torture could live up to the rumors and warnings about gay sex I'd been indoctrinated with. My lover wasn't gentle, but he seemed to be trying not to hurt me, which was something I'd never quite trusted my ex to do. As my body grew to accept the invasion, I found myself relaxing and arching back into him, desperate for more.

Thanks to what he'd done with his tongue, I was on the verge of coming the entire time he was fucking me. When I felt sure I was going to explode, he'd shift his angle just enough to pull me back, keeping me on the razor-thin edge of tension and the orgasm that was suddenly the only thought in my head—if raw, pulsing instinct could even be considered a thought.

His growls grew louder as his thrusts strengthened and his teeth scraped my neck, but it was nothing compared to the sweet sting of his nails digging into the flesh at my hips. I had imagined that my first time would be in a candlelit room with roses and gentle caresses, but one out of three wasn't bad. With each thrust, he seemed to hit my prostate from a different angle, and even though my logical brain couldn't comprehend the feral sounds he was making, my more primal nature was eager to submit to his savage domination.

If I'd ever entertained doubts that I was a bottom, they were gone now. I liked getting sucked off on the rare occurrence I had the chance, but I couldn't imagine anything that felt better than getting fucked so relentlessly. It wasn't something I thought I could handle every night, at least not until I was more experienced, but damn, what a goal to work up to.

My breaths went from shallow to rhythmic and I gasped as he arched into me at just the right angle to wring every ounce of tension from my body. My cock throbbed and pulsed, spraying the silk sheets, but his only response was a deep snarl of approval. I felt impossible fullness and pressure as he came inside of me, his cum so hot it soothed my ravished hole, but he didn't pull out right away. He collapsed on top of me, and I only realized he'd been keeping his full weight off me before when it crushed the breath from my lungs.

I reached back, tangling my hand in his damp hair, desperate to preserve the sense of closeness for just another moment. My body was still succumbing to the tingly little aftershocks of orgasm, his gradually softening shaft still stretching me out and rubbing against my sensitive spot whenever he moved even slightly. When he pulled out, I winced only to wish he would enter me again. I rolled onto my back and stared up at him as he sat up to catch his breath, raking his hand over his sweat-drenched hair.

I waited for him to say something, but he stood in silence instead. The way his eyes softened as they roamed my naked body made my heart clench with the desire for some other form of intimacy I couldn't quite put into words.

"You can use the shower first," he murmured. "I'll take care of the sheets."

My heart sank like it was made of lead. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting him to say, but it was certainly not that.

I sat up slowly and nodded as he pulled on his pants. I staggered a little when I stood up and he put a hand on my shoulder to steady me.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No," I mumbled, pulling away from him to head into the bathroom.

It was as spacious and elegantly decorated as the rest of the room, with a clawfoot bathtub and a candlelit glow from the sconces hanging on the wall. I drew a hot bath, relieved that at least the

strangely out-of-time home had running water.

As I sank my weary body into the tub, the water burned and soothed all at once. I let out a hiss of air through my teeth, allowing the water to relax my sore muscles and hopefully wash away the disappointment clinging to my skin.

How could something that had felt so good at the time leave me feeling so empty afterward? What had I expected? Loving words? A ring? A pony?

He was clearly more experienced than me. To him, it was probably just sex. He didn't seem like the type to crave intimacy.

When I returned to the room with a towel around my waist, he was sitting up in the freshly changed bed, wearing a pair of reading glasses as he pored over the book in his hands. The pleasant half-smile on his lips soothed my bruised ego and I slipped into the bed upon his invitation. At least he wasn't kicking me out.

I fell asleep that night with the warmth of him against my side, and as I drifted off, it occurred to me for the first time that I didn't even know his name.

Chapter Three

By the time I woke up, my stranger-slash-lover was gone. My shirt was in tatters somewhere, not to mention covered in another man's seed, and I discovered he had, in fact, snapped the button on my slacks as well. The only other evidence that anything had happened at all was the fact that I was still in a room that wasn't my own.

At some point in the night, I could remember waking to the unmistakable sensation of strong arms wrapped around my waist, holding me close to his sturdy torso. The steady rhythm of his heart and his familiar scent had lulled me back to sleep, but now the bed was empty and cold.

Looking around the room, I realized there was a change of clothing waiting for me on the chair sitting in front of a well-kept writing desk. The clothes fit surprisingly well, which meant they had probably come from Vera, which in turn meant she probably had some idea of what had transpired between us the night before. Not that his growling and my desperate gasps would leave much to the imagination of anyone who happened to be in the hall.

I gathered the fine clothes into my arms and looked for any sign of a mirror. There hadn't even been one above the bathroom sink.

I sighed, looking over all the scratches and bruises on my skin. I was sore everywhere, but nowhere quite as badly as my thoroughly used ass. I still had a bit of a limp, though I could hide it if I gritted my teeth and stood up straight.

How humiliating. The worst part wasn't the soreness I had earned through far more pleasure than pain the night before, but the fact that I had woken up alone. Out of all the imaginary scenarios in which I had lost my virginity, the one common denominator was that I had woken up in my lover's arms.

I got dressed, eager to feel a little less vulnerable, and glanced out into the hall to make sure the coast was clear. No need to add to my embarrassment.

I had half a mind to grab my things and leave the place right then, but my would-be walk of shame took a detour when curiosity got the best of me. After all, how many chances was I going to have to explore a real life castle?

I tiptoed my way down the stairs, both because I wasn't ready for the shame of meeting one of the servants who almost certainly had an idea of why neither their lord nor their houseguest had returned downstairs the night before, and because I felt like I was intruding.

To be fair, I was. Maybe I hadn't explicitly been told not to snoop, but if wandering around unaccompanied in a strange house was rude in the suburbs, it had to be rude in a house in the middle of the woods, too.

My guilt was short-lived when I found myself surrounded by all the wondrous distractions this place had in store. While it had been full of life and energy the night before, it seemed almost abandoned in the light of day. I couldn't hear anyone, so I took my next few steps with a bit more certainty.

What if the people I'd met so far weren't the only ones who lived here? After all, there had been an empty spot at the table during dinner. What if the lord had a partner and that was why he had been so distant after our unexpected encounter? The thought churned my stomach. The only thing worse than losing my virginity to a man who couldn't care less was losing it to a man who wasn't single. I combed my memories for a wedding ring, but I couldn't remember clearly enough to be sure. My thoughts and my eyes had admittedly been focused on other parts of the mysterious lord's body.

I decided to push the horrible possibility to the back of my mind since there was no point in tormenting my conscience any further until I had a way to know for sure.

I crept a bit further down the hall, newly cautious of running into someone else. There were a few closed doors in the hallway opposite of the one that led into the kitchen, but venturing into them would have been much too risky, and I already felt like a jerk for trespassing. There was one door, however, that was cracked open just slightly enough to be a temptation too great to pass up.

I reached out and pushed the door open slightly, jumping as it gave a loud creak. Light streamed in from the room behind me just enough to realize the door led into a stairwell. I groped the darkness for a railing and crept down, encouraged by the flickering light coming from somewhere below. I stopped on the middle of the stairs before deciding that I'd gone too far to turn back without at least satisfying my curiosity. What I found at the bottom of the stairs was both a disappointment and a relief.

The basement itself was finished, if dour with stone walls and not much in the way of decoration. Only one of the sconces on the wall was lit, and the candles seemed to have been burning for a while judging by the melted wax.

I crept further into the basement room, eyeing the thick white sheets draped over what had to be furniture. Of course. What had I been expecting, a dungeon? The thought made me laugh and the sound echoed through the broad area. There were stone pillars holding up the foundations of the castle, and reaching the end of a row of draped furniture revealed another hallway that wasn't visible from the stairs.

I couldn't see anything down the dark corridor since there were no candles lighting up that part of the basement. I took a step back, torn between leaving the basement before I was caught and grabbing the candle by the entrance to light my way and fuel my curiosity when my foot caught on a sheet. I stumbled a little and pulled the drapery off the edge of what looked like metal...

Chains?

There were two sets of absurdly thick chains fastened to the concrete wall. The wall itself was encrusted with huge flaking stains that could be little other than dried blood. A lot of it. It stained the wall, the chains, the floor beneath my feet. I shuffled back quickly.

This time, I didn't bother to cover my tracks. I kicked the heavy cloth aside with my foot and ran for the stairs, making it halfway before I tripped over something that came up to my waist. My hands groped something warm and wiry and covered in fur, and I let out a cry of alarm at the same time as the creature yelped. In the light coming from upstairs, I could barely make out light blond fur, but I didn't stop to find out what the lord of the house kept as a pet. I scrambled up the stairs and didn't stop until the front door came into view.

So did a huge black wolf whose back reached the top of the door handle. It set its gold eyes on me, hard and sentient, and this time, I couldn't even make an attempt to stifle the scream that escaped my throat. It was one of the wolves from the woods, of that much I was certain. How it had gotten into the house was beyond my ability or my desire to fathom.

A shorter but broader wolf with reddish brown fur loped up beside it, eyes wide with something I might have recognized as worry if I'd been capable of any thought other than run.

I turned, ready to bolt back down the stairs and slam the door behind me when I caught sight of the much smaller blond wolf I had tripped over on my way upstairs. It took a step closer, its tail wagging low in hesitation. I screamed and ran for the stairs that led up to my room since every other exit was blocked. I heard a cry of alarm from downstairs, but didn't stop to turn back.

Heavy footfalls on the stairs let me know the beasts were close in pursuit, and my mind was rife with visions of those sharp teeth at my neck. They hadn't finished me off in the woods for God only knew what reason, but it seemed they'd changed their minds.

Somehow, I made it into the room despite the fact that track had always been my least favorite activity in PE. I slammed the door and managed to lock it with fumbling hands, not thinking clearly enough to remember that wolves weren't equipped to use doorknobs. Then again, they had gotten into the castle somehow.

I turned and slid down the door. My heart was beating so violently, it felt like it was going to explode out of my ribcage. I had to warn the others, assuming the wolves hadn't already gotten to them, but how? I could scream again, but sound didn't carry well through the thick walls. That had been a comfort before, but not now that I needed to deliver a message of life or death.

I scanned the room for anything I could use to defend myself. For some reason, the wolves weren't clawing at the door like I'd expected. In fact, I couldn't hear anything in the hall even though I knew they had followed me up the stairs.

I grabbed a heavy candelabra from the dresser and brandished it as a weapon, trying in vain to talk myself out of what I was about to do. I reached for the knob, my hand still shaking, only to find that it wouldn't turn. I tried again and realized it had been locked from the outside. Sure enough, there was no keyhole facing into the room. Had it always been that way? I could certainly see how I hadn't noticed the night before during my limited time in my own room, but who had turned the doorknob around so it only locked from the outside? And why?

None of the answers that occurred to me were any consolation. I took a step back into the room, my head throbbing as much as my heart. I turned and looked out the window. It was a steep drop, but there was a lattice further down, propped against the side of the house. Thick vines of ivy clung to the

weathered wood and it didn't look sturdy, but it was better than the full drop. If I could scale down the window a bit and grab onto the lattice, maybe I could make it.

Assuming there weren't more wolves waiting for me in the woods, at least.

Given the choice between them and the realization that I had been locked in my room for reasons that couldn't possibly be good, not to mention definite wolves in the castle itself, I decided to take what might be my only chance of escape.

I grabbed my wallet and shoved it into my pocket, which was pretty useless since I only had twenty dollars to my name, and carefully climbed out the window. My head spun the second I looked down, so I kept my eyes fixed on the windowsill and clung to it with the full knowledge that my life—or, at the very least, my ability to walk—depended on not letting go.

I found myself cursing my insufficient height as I groped below for a foothold. Eventually, the toe of my shoe stuck into a gap in the lattice, and I tested it with my weight. When it felt sturdy enough, I started searching for a second foothold.

Gripping the lattice, I ventured a glance down and didn't see or hear any sign of wolves. This was a castle and the servants had to leave to get food somehow. Surely we were closer to a main road than I had been before. All I had to do was survive long enough to get there. After what I'd seen in the basement and knowing that someone had intentionally locked me in, I liked my odds better on my own.

At least now my brothers wouldn't be able to make fun of me for being a wuss. Of course, I would have to alter the details of the story if I ever did make it out of here so they wouldn't know I fell into bed with a likely serial killer before I even knew his name.

I dropped down, and I could have kissed the ground if I wasn't sure my lips would have frozen to it. I got to my feet and ran for the thick iron gate that separated the castle grounds and the labyrinth of white-crested hedges from the unforgiving forest. The Hollows were a constant source of fear to folks in town, but that night, they looked like a sanctuary.

The gate was shut, but the iron bars were spaced far enough apart I could probably squeeze through if I tried. I wasn't sure about the little blond wolf, but it would certainly give the larger two pause if they followed me.

The metal was so cold my hand stuck to it, but I managed to get my leg through and was working on my torso when I heard footsteps coming from the labyrinth. My heart stopped, but it was only Vera. The look in her eyes as they locked on me meant my relief was short lived. She was coming right toward me, her plump red lips set into a determined line.

I struggled at the gate and finally managed to slip free only to hear her cry, "*Capto eum!*"

I froze in shock at the metallic groan and turned in time to see two huge iron bars break free from the gate, stretching towards me like gnarled arms. They wrapped around me, binding my arms at my sides and choking the breath from me. I gasped in panic, but only enough air to keep me conscious filled my lungs.

"I'm sorry, honey," Vera said, slipping through the gap in the gate. She was watching me with a

sympathetic gaze as three wolves flanked her, two on her right and the big russet one on her left.

"Let me go!" I cried, struggling in vain against the metal vice. "Please!"

"Everything's going to be all right," she said in a tone that was probably meant to soothe my nerves, reaching out to sweep her hand over my eyes. "*Somnus ab angelis.*"

I strained and struggled more fiercely than ever, but my head was light from the limited oxygen supply and her words seemed to weave a spell of sleep around me. As the wolves crept closer, I succumbed. The last thing I was aware of was a howl splitting the air that was too far away to have come from any of them.

Chapter Four

I woke in the bed I had been in the first time I opened my eyes in the castle, which was only a slight improvement upon waking in my captor's bed. My head was still throbbing and I was sore in all the telling places as I sat up, dashing any hopes that losing my virginity to that asshole had been part of a strange, fevered dream.

There was no sign of anyone else in the room. I didn't bother to check to see if the door was locked. Even if it wasn't, it was clear that I was always being watched and my captors had other ways of keeping me on the grounds.

The wolves were terrifying, but it was Vera's betrayal that stung the most. I wouldn't have gone as far as to say that I'd trusted her, but it was hard to accept that my judgment of her character could be so far off. She wasn't kind or compassionate as I'd thought. She was, at the very least, complicit in keeping me there against my will.

Why they wanted me was another story entirely. I had already willingly given the lord my body, and they certainly weren't keeping me in hopes of extracting a ransom from my family.

Not that my parents would have paid it if they had the money, or if the lord and his strange servants had need of it.

Mattie's innocent eyes flashed in my mind. Was he in on it, too?

The knowledge that I had eaten with them all just hours before they turned against me made my stomach feel like it was made of the same heavy iron that had bruised my skin.

A light knock at the door made me jolt. I wasn't sure why whoever was on the other side was even bothering to knock since they had me at their mercy. When I saw Vera enter the room, I turned away, refusing to look at her.

"Oh, don't be like that," she pleaded, her skirt swishing as she moved to sit beside me on the bed. She reached out to put a cool hand to my forehead. "How are you feeling?"

I jerked away from her. "Why, you want to knock me out again?"

I expected her to retaliate. Snarking at a witch wasn't the smartest move, but I was too angry to help it. The way her face fell and her eyes filled with guilt at my reaction was almost worse. "I'm sorry, darling. I really am. I didn't want it to be this way. None of us did."

"Who is 'us'?" I asked warily. "Are you all in on it?"

Not that I had the first clue what "it" was. She wouldn't meet my eyes, but that was an answer in and of itself.

"Why?" I mumbled. "What do you want with me?"

"I know it doesn't make much sense right now, but you have to believe me when I say it's for your own good. We don't mean you any harm. If we did, it would've come to you already."

I couldn't argue with that, if only because I lacked the clarity of mind to argue anything at the moment. "Why should I believe anything you say?"

"I guess you shouldn't," she murmured. "The short answer is that this place is cursed, Blaine. You can't leave, and if you'd gotten much further past that gate, you wouldn't have lasted long."

I frowned, struggling to gauge whether she was lying or not. The kindness in her voice made it so much harder to be objective, but I found myself wondering whether that was just another enchantment designed to make me trust her.

"You're not under a spell right now," she said as if reading my thoughts. Before I could ask if she was, her lips curved into a smile. "And no, I'm not reading your mind. I've just been alive long enough to know how to read everything else."

I eyed her doubtfully. "You look like you're thirty." It was a bit of a lowball estimate, but I was more afraid to insult her now than ever.

She gave a musical laugh and seemed flattered. "Oh, I'm much older than that," she said, pressing a hand to a smooth cheek. "Magic has its perks, you know."

I decided I didn't want to know just how much older she really was. I already had enough on my mind to process. "You said the castle is cursed. If you're a witch, can't you just lift it?"

"I wish I could," she said with a wistful sigh. "I've been trying for years, but the magic's just set in too deep. In an old place like this, there are plenty of nooks and crannies for it to seep into and take hold. Kind of like the human heart, I guess."

"Those wolves outside... they're your pets, aren't they?"

The twinkle came back into her eyes. "I wouldn't say that, but they don't mean any harm, either. They live here, just the same as I do."

"Why? Don't the others mind?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then seemed to change her mind. "Mattie," she called instead. "Come in here for a moment, dear."

A moment later, the blond boy appeared at the door, worrying at his thumbnail as he looked between us. He wouldn't meet my eyes, either. He looked guilty. "Yeah?"

"It's about time Blaine understood the way things work around here, but some things are easier shown than told."

A look of knowing passed over his gentle features and he nodded, kneeling down on the floor. I watched him in confusion that quickly turned to horror as his face melted into a painful grimace. His back arched sharply and seemed to fold in half with a sickly crack before the rest of his bones shifted visibly under his skin.

I cried out and scrambled further onto the bed as I watched him change. The transition picked up speed rapidly. One moment, he was human, and the next, the small blond wolf was standing in his place, tail wagging and bottom teeth showing in a hopeful grin.

I stared because I couldn't remember how to do anything else. After what seemed like forever, the wolf took a hesitant step forward and I moved back.

"It's all right," Vera said, dropping to her knees. She reached out to stroke the wolf's light yellow fur and he leaned adoringly into her hand, licking her cheek. "Mattie here wouldn't hurt a fly. Well, maybe a cat..."

"Mattie?" I croaked in disbelief. Even though I had seen him change before my eyes, I couldn't bring myself to accept it.

He made a chuffing sound as if to reply.

I gulped. "Can you understand me?"

His tail wagged again and this time, when he trotted toward me, I resisted the urge to cringe away. Hesitantly, I reached out and he waited patiently until I worked up the courage to touch him. The fur on his head and neck felt surprisingly soft as I stroked it, and he leaned into my hand the same way he'd done with Vera.

"He's a werewolf?" I squeaked, looking back at the witch. "Are you...?"

"No, no," she said with a laugh. "I'm more of a bird person myself. I'm the only one in the castle who's not a werewolf, though."

"Aavai and Birch?" The russet and black wolves flashed in my mind, and I felt dizzy. Mattie wasn't exactly intimidating, but I couldn't imagine encountering the two of them in their shifted forms again without passing out from sheer terror.

"Them, too. They're a pack, and the man you met last night is their alpha, not some feudal lord."

"Alpha?" I felt dizzy again, but Mattie leaned against me as if to keep me steady. I had always wanted a dog, but not one who turned into a person. Or maybe it was the other way around.

"You're quite familiar with him, I believe," she said in a knowing tone.

My face turned hot. The alpha bad boy types in school had never looked twice at me, but apparently, I had some game with alpha werewolves. "Oh."

"They were cursed by another witch years ago," she said, growing somber. Mattie let out a high-pitched whine and leaned into me for comfort. My fear of him was diminishing by the second. "Normally, werewolves are human and can shift anytime they like, except on full moons, when they have to shift whether they want to or not. The witch who cursed the pack reversed the natural order,

and now they can only take their human forms on the three days the moon is at its fullest.”

"They're wolves the rest of the time?"

Mattie barked sharply.

"I'll take that as a yes," I said.

Vera smiled sadly. "Try as I might, I can't lift the curse. Not on my own."

I frowned. "What do you need?"

"Don't you worry about that," she said, patting my hand. "The important thing is that you understand there are forces in these woods more powerful than human beings—and much darker."

"If I'm trapped here because of the curse, does that mean I'm going to turn into a wolf, too?" I asked worriedly.

Vera laughed. "No, not at all. They were all werewolves first. Well, all of them except Beast, but that's a whole other story."

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that name. "How?"

Her lips pursed again. "He's just different from the rest. You'll see eventually."

I wasn't sure I wanted to, but I still didn't feel like it was safe to put up too much of an argument with a witch and a werewolf in the room, small and affectionate though he was. "How long do I have to stay here?"

She hesitated. "From what little you've told us of your home life, I get the feeling there's not a whole lot waiting for you back in town."

I looked down at the floor and my heart felt heavier than it ever had. "There's my grandfather..."

"You said he lives in the Hollows, right?"

"Yeah, on the outskirts."

"Then he might be within range," she mused. "Trust me when I say you don't want to go back out into those woods on your own, but with enough time and a little juice, I might be able to extend the pack's range enough to escort you there."

"Juice?" I echoed.

"Magic comes from the earth and the heavens, so I'll have to wait until a time when there's a lot of power flowing through this old girl," she said, stamping the floor with her heel. "The spring equinox should do it. The veil between our world and the spirit world is at its thinnest then, and that should be enough to get you where you need to go."

"But that's months away!"

"Consider it a vacation. I'm sorry, Blaine, but that's the best I can do."

"I guess it's better than nothing," I mumbled.

"It's certainly better than getting eaten by a bear!" she said brightly.

I shivered and the sensation sparked the memory of what I had seen in the basement. I hesitated. "So you really aren't going to hurt me?"

"Of course not." She frowned. "Why would we go through all the trouble of saving your life if we wanted to hurt you?"

I hesitated. "I went in the basement..."

A look of realization passed her face, but she didn't seem angry. "Ahh," she said with a dry laugh. "So you found Beast's leash."

"Leash?"

"Figure of speech." She hesitated. "Do you remember when I said Beast was different from the rest of the pack?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, there was a time when the transformations weren't as straightforward as the others. Those chains were necessary to hold him."

I swallowed hard. "Is he dangerous?"

"Not anymore."

I wasn't sure I found that comforting, but I decided to be grateful I hadn't run into him. If I was going to survive, maybe it was time to take a cue from him and stay in my room.

Chapter Five

That night, Mattie came to my door to tell me dinner was ready, but I lied and told him I felt sick. He seemed to believe me, and even though I should have learned my lesson about snooping earlier, I decided I should take advantage of the fact that everyone was gathered downstairs.

My plan of staying in my room had lasted only as long as it took for my curiosity and desire to escape to set in. I told myself it wasn't really snooping as long as I didn't open any closed doors. Besides, it was obvious they could lock the ones they really wanted to keep people out of—or inside.

Mattie's piano playing downstairs reassured me that all was well with the rest of the servants—or pack, as it turned out. That explained why they acted like a family. Everyone except the alpha, that was. The knowledge that the handsome, brooding man I had met the night before was their leader made sense of some things and threw the light of confusion on others.

At least now I knew why he was so rough in bed.

Or maybe he was gentle for a werewolf.

There was still Beast, the other mysterious occupant of the castle I had yet to meet. I could only imagine what he was hiding if I hadn't seen him yet and Vera felt the need to dance around the topic. What curse could be worse than being stuck as a wolf for most of the month?

I stopped walking when I heard something further up the hall in a wing of the house I had yet to explore. It was near the alpha's room, but the door was propped open, and I could hear occasional hard clicking sounds coming from inside.

When I stopped in the doorway, I caught a glimpse of one edge of a pool table and a white ball colliding with a small cluster across the green felt. Two stripes sunk into adjacent holes and I waited for the sole player to move to take his next shot.

Part of me had hoped it might be the alpha, even though I was as anxious about running into him again as I was hopeful. As horrifying as the discovery that monsters were real was, it was slightly preferable to think there might have been a supernatural reason the man I'd given my virginity to had left me to wake up alone as opposed to him having a partner.

Or was mate a better term?

My breath caught in my throat when I realized it was him. The fact that I didn't even know his name

filled me with even more shame, but if I was going to be stuck here, I knew I had to face him at some point.

I crept closer to the doorway and cleared my throat so he wouldn't think I was sneaking up on him. He looked up at me, and all of a sudden, I could remember why I had fallen into his arms so easily the night before. From his long hair to those wild eyes, the man was sex on legs.

"Hey. I thought I heard someone in here," I said.

He rose to his full height, leaning on the cue in his hand. "Shouldn't you be at dinner?"

"I wasn't hungry."

He gave a noncommittal grunt before leaning over the table to take his next shot. "You play?"

"Just a few times. Not well," I admitted.

He propped the cue against the table and moved to open a box sitting on top of one of the smaller bookshelves in the room. "Darts, then? Everyone plays darts."

I wasn't about to argue, so I said, "Sure."

"Don't just stand there gaping," he said, glancing back at me. "Either come in or out. You're worse than a cat."

I gulped.

"Since you're not running and screaming in terror, I take it Vera explained things," he said, placing a box full of neatly arranged darts in two sets of red and blue on the edge of the table. I watched as he picked up a red one and eyed the board before sending the small projectile soaring. It stuck directly in the bullseye.

I took a moment to look around the room since I was pretty sure he wasn't going to miss anytime soon. There were two solid walls made up of bookshelves and filled to the brim. A big window overlooked the courtyard below, and I realized it was the only window I had seen open yet.

"Is this your room, too?" I asked.

"Not exactly, but hardly anyone else ever comes in here."

I could only imagine that had something to do with the intimidating energy that filled any room he was in but I wasn't about to say that. This wasn't exactly the way I'd imagined our next encounter going, but I decided it was better than sitting down face-to-face.

"So," I began. "You're werewolves."

"Yes." He sent another dart flying and it landed right next to the first.

"That's... how?"

He glanced over at me, the ghost of a smile on his lips. "How are we wolves?"

It sounded silly when he put it like that. "Yeah."

"The same way humans are humans and witches are witches, I suppose," he said, tossing another dart. "We just are."

"And you're the alpha?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Um. I just realized, I don't really know your name." *Smooth, Blaine.*

He blinked. "I'm sure someone has mentioned it."

Was he going to make me beg? "It's just, you know mine and now I'm stuck here until the harvest moon and last night, we... well..."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "About that. I didn't plan any of that, and I didn't expect you to follow me upstairs," he muttered, his tone making it sound like this was a confession. So much for whatever dwindling hope I had of not losing my virginity to a one-night stand. "Wolves get weird on full moons. Our primal instincts are harder to resist."

His words were like a punch in the gut. So that's what last night was to him. A lapse in judgment. A mistake. "Oh."

He frowned like he didn't understand my reaction. "I'm not saying I regret it. I just thought you might."

"No," I murmured. "Not until this moment."

The alpha's gaze softened and he put down the dart in his hand, taking a step toward me. When he reached out to touch my face, I flinched instinctively, but as rough as his hand was, his touch was gentle. Much gentler than it had been the night before.

"I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot, Blaine," he said quietly. "How about we start over?"

His tone was so soothing and entreating, I couldn't have refused the offer even if I wanted to. I nodded.

"Good." He paused, offering his hand to me. When I reluctantly returned the handshake, he smirked and said, "My name is Rohan."

"Rohan..." The name felt pleasant on my tongue, like the whispered moans he'd elicited from me so many times the night before. The memory made my face turn even warmer. "Nice to officially meet you, since we had sex and all."

He grinned. "Likewise, Blaine." His eyes flickered over me, and I recognized the lust that had been in them before coming back to the surface. "I have to admit, that was one hell of an introduction."

I rolled my eyes. "At least now I know why you didn't freak out when you found out I was gay."

"Being gay isn't a requirement for being decent," he shot back, leaning against the pool table. "You just need to expand your horizons beyond Tendale."

"Easier said than done when you're not a feudal lord," I said dryly, tossing another dart at the board. It missed.

“Most young people who grow up in towns like yours go away for college. Why didn’t you?”

“I went to the community college for a while. The only place out of town that wanted me was too expensive,” I admitted.

He frowned. “And your parents didn’t save for your education?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the surprise in his tone. We really did come from different worlds. “My mom’s a housewife and my dad is a shift manager at a factory. Everything they had went to my brothers.”

“I see. And what have these brothers of yours amounted to?”

My mouth tried to twist itself into a smile but I fought it. “Tom works at the factory with our dad because he’s gotten fired from everywhere else for getting into fights. Ben’s a dropout who plays games all day and mooches off his girlfriend’s weed.”

“Wise investments, to be sure,” he scoffed, hitting another bullseye. “And what would you be, if you could be anything?”

It was a strange question, and one I’d only ever been asked once before. My grandfather was the only person in the family who’d ever seen enough potential in me to wonder about my future beyond how I might shame the family.

“I guess I’d study something practical. Accounting, maybe,” I said. There wasn’t a need for another in Tendale, and I assumed there was plenty of demand elsewhere, so it had always seemed like the safest path away from my family without burning any bridges.

Rohan gave me the same look my grandfather had the first time I’d told him of my practical plan. “That’s not what I asked.”

I sighed. “If I could do anything, I guess I’d go to art school. But it’s just a waste of money.”

“Is that what you think or what your parents say?”

It was another good question. I knew the answer, but I didn’t feel like admitting it. He didn’t seem to expect me to.

“Would you like to go for a walk?” he asked, plucking the darts from the board.

“Am I allowed?” I asked innocently. “Since I’m being kept prisoner here and all.”

He smirked. “If you want to brave the blizzard, be my guest. Either way, grab your coat.”

I watched him stride from the room, wondering at his casual tone. Vera had made it sound as if I’d die the moment I passed the castle gates, but Rohan didn’t seem concerned.

Once we made it outside, the cold air made my bones ache, but Rohan didn’t seem affected in the slightest, despite the fact that he was only wearing a cotton shirt. He looked over at me and smiled as if he could read my mind. “Werewolves have a higher body temperature than humans. It would have to be much colder than this to bother me.”

“The more you know.” I looked around, taken by the winter splendor surrounding the castle. From the evergreen trees fencing us in on the mountains to the tops of the iron gates and the maze of hedges on the lawn, everything was cloaked in a plush layer of snow. It crunched beneath my boots as I followed him onto the path that had been cleared through the snow.

I found myself wondering if Birch shoveled or if Vera simply waved her magic wand. It was an amusing thought, either way.

“Your castle is beautiful,” I said.

“Thank you. It’s seen better days, like the rest of us.”

“How did you end up living in a place like this if you’re not royalty?”

He chuckled. “There are other titles beyond the ones humans bestow. Wolf packs are more common than you’d think, and we have our nobles.”

“So you’re more than just the alpha of this pack?”

“I was once,” he murmured. “This place was a sanctuary for traveling wolves who needed it. There were meetings, parties, guests... The curse didn’t just seal us in, it kept everyone else out.”

“Because they’ll be trapped here, too?” I asked, remembering Vera’s warning.

A strange look came over his face. Something like guilt. “Yes,” he said brusquely. “Just like you.”

“That’s awful,” I mumbled. Wolves seemed like social creatures, and even I would have gone crazy after being trapped for so long. I hesitated. “How long have you been here?”

“Twenty years, give or take.”

My eyes widened. “But you don’t look that old.”

“Thanks,” he said wryly. “We only age when we’re in our human forms, and that’s only been a fraction of the time for the last couple of decades.”

“Oh. Um, Vera said you were cursed by a witch,” I said carefully. It had to be a sore subject. “Can I ask what happened?”

His expression was as heavy as the clouds overhead, but he didn’t snap at me the way most people did when my curiosity made me a nuisance.

“I had everything an alpha could want. The devotion and respect of my pack, more land than any wolf could cover, and great wealth. The one thing I lacked was the ability to enjoy it all forever, so I hired a witch to help me find a cure for mortality,” he said bitterly, sweeping his hand over the dead, frostbitten branch of a rose bush. It was only recognizable in its current state because of the dull red thorns creeping up the branches. “It turned out to be as foolish as it sounds.”

“I’m sorry. No one deserves this, no matter what kind of mistake you made in the past.”

The sadness in his eyes caught me by surprise. “You don’t know the whole story,” he said softly. “I deserve all this and more, but my pack shouldn’t have paid the price for my selfishness.”

It occurred to me as he spoke that this moment felt more intimate than the one we'd shared the night before. He was certainly showing me a side of himself I hadn't seen even though we'd both been unclothed. I reached out and touched his jaw. The touch seemed to surprise him as much as it did me, but when I leaned in to kiss him, he returned it.

His lips were warm and his chest like heated stone as he pulled me to him, and I realized he hadn't been exaggerating about having a different body temperature. It was far more noticeable in the cold. I parted my lips as his tongue entered my mouth. I would have been perfectly content never to take another breath if he hadn't pulled away.

He looked up at the darkening clouds and frowned. "It'll be night soon," he said somberly. "I should go."

"Um... all right," I said, still breathless as I watched him turn and walk back toward the castle.

I followed him inside, but by the time I reached the entryway, he was gone.

Chapter Six

After Rohan had gone off to wherever it was he liked to hide when he wasn't playing darts or taking a stranger's virginity, I went back to my room. I hadn't realized just how much our short walk had taken out of me until my head hit the pillow and I fell asleep.

When I woke up again, it was still dark out, so I decided to roam a bit since it was going to be my home until the equinox, at the very least.

The castle was warm and safe and full of people who didn't act like I was a constant irritation. I could be myself around them without fear of having scriptures screamed at me or getting kicked out. Besides, it wasn't like I had anywhere more important to be. All I'd be doing at my grandfather's was getting in the way of his art.

That and my feelings for Rohan were as confusing as they had been the night before. I was still processing the way he'd opened up to me earlier about the curse. I could tell he shouldered more guilt than he wanted to let on, and I wondered if that was the real reason there was so much distance between him and the rest of the pack.

As I wandered down the hall, I could hear voices coming from the room where I'd played darts with Rohan. There was a light beneath the door, so I took care to keep myself in the shadows and listened. As I got closer, I could make out Vera's soft yet indignant tone as she argued with a man whose voice sounded raw and unnaturally deep.

Beast?

It had to be. He was the only one in the house I'd yet to meet, and from the anger in his words, I wasn't sure I wanted to. He sure as hell sounded like he would have that name.

"You might have warned me about your lies," he snarled.

"You didn't give me the chance!" she protested.

"It doesn't matter. I won't have my own pack running around making a fool out of me."

"Be reasonable! What if he's the one?"

"He's human!"

“So was Evan,” she protested.

For a moment, Beast said nothing. I got the feeling he was more furious than contemplative. My suspicions were confirmed when he snarled, “I thought I told you I never wanted to hear that name spoken in this castle again.”

“You can’t erase the past,” Vera said firmly. “This is our chance. Can’t you see that? Not just yours—the entire pack’s.”

“And what happens when he realizes you lied to him, hm? How well do you think your little plan is going to go then?”

I frowned. Were they talking about me? They had to be...

“Please, just try! That’s all I’m asking, just try to give him a chance and—”

“Shh,” Beast hissed.

The room fell silent, and by the time I got the sense to leave, the door flew open. I would have been alarmed enough about getting caught, but when I saw a massive monster as tall and wide as the door frame staring down at me, I couldn’t stop the cry of horror that escaped my throat. I fell back on my ass hard enough to knock the wind out of me and stared, unable to blink or breathe.

The beast was bipedal with a vaguely humanoid build, but his head was all wolf. He had a long, sloped muzzle that was wrinkled in an irritated snarl and piercing golden eyes that were just as angry. His fur was nearly black and covered every inch of his body, at least what wasn’t covered by the thick dark gray cloak that had to be custom made. He was huge. Impossibly huge.

No wonder his name was Beast.

“Case in point,” he growled to Vera.

“Y-you can talk?” It was perhaps the dumbest thing I could have asked, but I couldn’t help myself. “What are you?”

“The Easter bunny,” he growled.

Vera appeared beside him, rubbing her forehead like she had a headache, and since she didn’t look too concerned about either of us being eaten, I started to relax a little. “Would you stop being a smartass and help the boy up?”

Beast extended a massive clawed hand to me, and the look of bitter amusement in his eyes made it clear he knew I was going to choose to scramble back onto my feet on my own. I couldn’t stop staring at him despite the warnings firing through the more civilized regions of my brain.

Vera shot him a look and took my arm. “Blaine, this is Beast,” she said in a stiff tone, still making eye contact with the beast, as if her words held some meaning for him that I wasn’t supposed to know about. “He’s... part of the pack. Remember when I said he was a little different?”

“A little?” I echoed before I could stop.

Beast gave a snort of irritation and turned to lumber down the hall. Only when he was out of sight did

I finally feel like I was starting to get my bearings. “W-why does he look like that?”

“The curse afflicted him differently,” she said, casting a worried glance down the hall. “He’s... well, it’s complicated, but like I told you, he’s harmless.”

“I doubt that,” I blurted out.

She gave me a patient smile. “Come on, let’s get some nice hot tea into you. A little chamomile will calm you down.”

She led me down the hall to a beautiful room that was far more modern than I would have expected a witch’s to be, but I knew it was hers right away. The vases and pots covering every surface were filled with flowering plants, which were in bloom despite being completely out of season, and there were whimsical decorations interspersed between things like feathers, bones, mirrors, and chalices that were almost definitely used for witchcraft.

She had me sit down at a tiny table for one and poured some tea into the rose-patterned cup in front of me. “Biscotti?”

“No, thanks.” My hands shook when I tried to pick up the cup, so I decided to let it cool. Now that I had some distance from the source of my terror, the guilt was starting to set in. Monster or not, I’d been rude as hell to him. “I’m sorry for freaking out.”

“It’s understandable. I’ve seen a lot and he still gave me a start the first time I saw him,” she said with a heavy sigh as she stirred a few lumps of sugar into her tea.

“I guess I can see why he keeps to himself,” I murmured.

She pursed her lips. “Yes. Well, I’m afraid he’s a bit testy under the best of circumstances.”

“You were arguing about me, weren’t you?” I asked warily.

Her eyes widened and I could tell she was thinking about lying to me. The fact that she closed her eyes and sank back into her chair in defeat gave me hope. “We were.”

“Why?”

“He’s set in his ways, and he’s not crazy about the idea of having a human here. That’s all.”

I wasn’t sure I believed she was telling me the whole truth, but I decided pressing her on it wasn’t going to yield any progress. “I guess I can understand that.”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks,” she said quickly. “He’s not the alpha. Rohan is.”

“Right. Where is Rohan, anyway?” I assumed he’d gone back into his wolf form like the others, since the full moon had passed. There was a part of me that wasn’t sure I wanted to see it, but my curiosity always had gotten the best of me.

“Oh, he goes off and does his own thing most of the time,” she said dismissively. “I don’t like the pack running around in the house, so they spend most of their time outdoors.”

“In the cold?” I asked in disbelief.

Vera chuckled. “They’re dressed for the weather. Besides, there’s more for them to do out there than there is in here. Four paws and fangs don’t go well with hardwood floors, rooms full of priceless breakables, and doors that require hands to open.”

“I guess not. So I won’t see any of them again until the next full moon?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Mattie comes around here and there, but the pack likes to hunt and stretch their legs as far beyond the castle grounds as the curse will allow.”

“How far, exactly?”

“Not far enough to reach your grandfather’s cabin, I’m afraid,” she said sympathetically. “I used a scrying mirror last night. He’s a few miles out of range.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my shoulders sink in defeat.

“Don’t fret, sweetheart. Consider the next month a vacation. You and me pretty much have the whole castle to ourselves.”

“Except for Beast, who hates my guts.”

She grinned. “Well, you didn’t get off to the best start, but there’s time.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, deciding to try to look on the bright side of things. I just wished Rohan had bothered to stick around long enough to tell me goodbye.

Chapter Seven

Over the next few days, the castle proved to be as quiet as I'd feared. Despite being impossible to miss the first night I'd met him, Beast kept a low profile. Every night and every morning, I'd go out onto the balcony of my room and look for any sign of the others. From time to time, I'd hear their howls on the wind, but none of them sounded familiar.

I told myself I was being silly and sentimental to think I'd somehow be able to recognize Rohan's howl when I hadn't even seen him as a wolf.

By the second week, I was convinced that even though he rarely left my thoughts, I wasn't so much as a blip on his radar.

I ventured downstairs in search of food and realized I'd been spoiled on Aavai's cooking. He'd left plenty of ingredients in the kitchen, and I had realized after a few days that no matter what I took out or how out of season the ingredients were, the pantries were always magically restocked the next time I checked. It looked like there were some benefits to living in an enchanted castle, after all.

Now I just had to find a way to live with the boredom. Vera always agreed to play cards with me in the evening, but she'd never stopped trying to find a way to break the curse, and she was always busy during the day with her books and her spells.

I had half a mind to take up the craft myself just for an excuse to spend more time with her, but if I ever did manage to get home, I wasn't keen on the idea of being a gay witch in Tendale.

When I heard music coming from the lounge downstairs that definitely wasn't from Mattie's piano, I knew someone was watching TV. And it couldn't be Vera since she was in the middle of spellwork.

Then again, we didn't even have a phone, much less a TV.

Curiosity got the better of me as usual, and I headed downstairs to see what was going on, wondering if the stuff about not having electronics wasn't true after all. I hated that I wouldn't have been surprised.

My gaze immediately landed on the hulking werewolf stretched across the sofa, his massive arm draped over the back. He was watching what looked like a mirror propped against the wall opposite the sofa, but instead of a reflective surface, a shimmering portal was stretched from one side of the ornate golden frame to the other. It may as well have been a TV since the portal was displaying some

kind of play I quickly figured out was *Les Misérables*. I knew that soundtrack anywhere.

Beast didn't strike me as the musical type, but I shouldn't have assumed.

He sniffed the air and turned to face me with a weary look in his eyes. If I hadn't literally just stepped out of the shower, I might have been offended.

"Hey," I said, taking a step into the room. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing," he muttered, standing from the couch. "It's all yours, if you can figure out how it works."

"Wait," I pleaded, blocking his path to the door. Admittedly not the brightest idea when it came to a creature who looked like he could rip a full-grown tree out of the ground without breaking a sweat, but it was the first chance I'd had to apologize in weeks. "I'm sorry about what happened when we first met."

"You mean how you screamed and recoiled in disgust when you saw me?"

"Not disgust," I insisted. "Just... surprise."

"Surprise," he echoed with a snort, pushing past me.

"Beast!" I ran after him, but with a stride that measured half a room in length, he was hard to keep up with. "I mean it. I'm really sorry I hurt your feelings. Can we please just start over?"

"My feelings?" he scoffed. He stopped so suddenly I ran into him and when he turned around, his eyes were full of both irritation and amusement. I felt even worse for my first reaction. He might have been a beast, but his expressions made it clear he had very human emotions—and an ego to match. "I'm surprised you think I have any, being a 'monster' and all."

I flinched. So he had heard me talking to Vera. "Okay, I deserve that. I know you have every right to hate me, but please, at least give me the chance to make it up to you."

"Why do you care?" he asked, searching my face. "Are you really that desperate for companionship?"

His voice echoed through the empty castle and I shrugged. "We're both alone. The way I see it, there's no reason we have to be lonely."

He let out a weary sigh, like just talking to me was taxing, and started walking again.

"Where are we going?" I asked, following along.

He shot me a look over his shoulder. "I'm going to make something to eat. You can join me if you want."

"Can I help?" I asked as he opened the magical pantry and surveyed its contents.

"I'd rather you didn't," he said, taking out a few bags of perpetually fresh vegetables. He started cutting them up and I gulped when I saw how good he was with that knife. Not that I'd fare any better against his claws if he decided to attack me.

When I finally looked up, he was giving me that look again. "You know, you could at least try to

pretend you're not horrified by me."

"I'm not," I insisted. "It's just... I'm human. I knew there were witches because my family was terrified of them, but I never actually thought anything else was real. I wasn't even entirely sure about witchcraft."

"Then this has been a particularly educational trip for you."

"You got that right," I muttered. He made a sound that almost sounded like a laugh, so I decided to try my luck. "So... tell me about yourself."

"What?"

"You know. Where you come from? Hobbies, favorite movies... that kind of thing."

He rolled his eyes. "I come from here, and my hobbies include being left alone and terrifying twinks."

I sighed. "Funny."

He aggressively chopped the end off another cucumber and flicked it off the tip of his knife and into the trash. I was pretty sure he was scaring me on purpose at this point.

"So... is that what you and Vera were arguing about?" I asked, trying not to show it was working. "You not wanting me here?"

"Let me get this straight. You were caught eavesdropping on a private conversation, and now you want clarification?"

"Um. Yeah."

He shook his head with another short laugh. "Let's just say Vera and the others are more optimistic about your stay here than I am."

"What does that mean?"

"It means they think it's destiny," he said wryly. "That you were sent here to break the curse."

"The curse?" My eyes widened. "But how? I'm not a witch." Hell, I wasn't even allowed to light candles at home.

"My point exactly."

"How would you lift the curse, anyway?" I asked, curious.

"I don't know." There was something in the softness of a voice that was usually so rough that made me think he was lying, but I valued my life too much to comment. "But even if we did know, that doesn't mean it's possible. They just haven't accepted the truth yet."

"Which is...?"

His gaze darkened. "That Rohan condemned us all to suffer here until we die with his own selfishness."

His words sent a chill down my spine, but I couldn't blame him for his anger. If I'd been cursed because of a mistake someone else had made, I'd be pretty pissed, too. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I don't know if it makes a difference, but I think he spends enough time beating himself up over it."

For a moment, Beast studied me intently. He finally sighed and turned away to drop the vegetables he'd been chopping into a skillet and turned on the gas stove. At least one thing in the castle didn't seem to run on magic. "You like him."

It was an accusation, plain and simple. It took me a second to think of a reply. "I do," I admitted, deciding if it was that obvious, there was no point in denying it.

"No wondering why, I suppose," he muttered, tossing the vegetables over the open flame before throwing in a dash of salt. I tried not to think about how he was probably getting fur in the food. I'd been enough of a dick already. "He's handsome, charming, rich..."

"I don't care about that kind of thing," I said, slightly offended. "I mean... yeah, he is handsome and charming, but it doesn't matter."

He gave a disbelieving snort and put a plate down in front of me. "And yet, I'm willing to bet that ex of yours didn't look like me."

The food smelled incredible. Worth swallowing my pride, at the very least. I took a bite and tried not to sigh in bliss. Aavai had competition. "If by that you mean he's not an eight-foot-tall wolf-man, no," I conceded. "Not many of those wandering around Tendale."

To my surprise, he actually laughed. Just when I was starting to think all he was capable of was scoffing.

"Hey," I said as something occurred to me. "I never told you about my ex."

He stared at me blankly for a second before shrugging it off and taking a bite of his food. "Not much to talk about around here. Word travels fast."

"I guess so. And for your information, Brad isn't a supermodel and he definitely isn't rich." I didn't know why it bothered me so much that he thought I was shallow, but it did.

"Bet he's got blond hair, blue eyes and a chiseled jaw."

I scowled. "His eyes are green."

"Mhm."

"Would you stop that?"

"Stop what?" he asked innocently.

"Stop making these snap judgments when you don't know anything about me."

"I know more than you think."

"Oh, yeah?" I folded my arms. "Then by all means, tell me about myself."

“All right.” He leaned on the counter, his lupine eyes traversing my face. It took an insultingly short amount of time for him to decide he’d sized me up. “You’re gay.”

“Obviously. Tell me something you couldn’t figure out from an aerial view.”

“You’re the youngest child,” he continued. “Major daddy issues. Bad at sports all your life, but you’re creative. Painting, or maybe sculpting...”

“Drawing,” I muttered. Four for four.

“Right. Your family doesn’t approve, and it makes you feel separate from them, but you don’t really mind, because you don’t want to be like them, either. You just want them to accept you, even though you clearly don’t accept yourself.”

“Clearly, huh?”

“Clearly,” he repeated. “Oh, and you also have a desperate need to be liked, even by people you don’t like. Case in point, you’re sitting here with me.”

My face fell. “I don’t dislike you. We just got off to a bad start. I don’t even know you.”

“You didn’t know Rohan, and yet you jumped into bed with him immediately.”

His words stung like a whip. My shock must have shown on my face, because his eyes softened.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I shouldn’t have gone there.”

“It’s fine,” I said stiffly. Of course he knew. The whole damn castle probably knew. “You’re right. I lost my virginity to a guy I don’t even know and who didn’t even bother to tell me he was going to be on a month-long hiatus in the woods. Go ahead and judge me, you’re not gonna come up with anything I haven’t thought of myself.”

He stared at me for long enough that I started to wish I’d taken a beer when he’d offered me one. The only thing worse than the loneliness was the awkwardness of this dinner.

“What?” he finally asked.

I frowned. “What, what?”

“You just said you... you were a virgin?” His voice was rougher than usual, and I couldn’t bring myself to guess why he sounded so upset. It wasn’t like it involved him. I hadn’t even realized the words had slipped out of my mouth in my shock.

“Yeah... um. I was. Guess that’s a thing you know now.”

“Sorry,” he said, clearing his throat. “It’s none of my business.”

I shrugged, moving my potatoes and carrots around with my fork. I’d lost my appetite halfway through the meal. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. It obviously matters to you,” he said, watching me in concern. I think I preferred judgment and sarcasm, coming from him. “Did he know?”

“No, and I’d appreciate if you didn’t say anything to him. It’s obvious that it didn’t mean to him what it meant to me.”

He opened his mouth to say something and stopped, wrinkling his nose and letting out a growl of frustration. “It did. Mean something, I mean.”

I gave him a wary look. “No offense, but how the hell do you know that?”

“We’re a pack,” he said. “I know Rohan better than anyone. Trust me when I say, if he’d known that was your first time, things would have been different.”

The air of authority with which he spoke of another’s feelings perplexed me, but for some reason, I found myself believing him. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but my wounds were fresh enough, I’d take any comfort I could get.

“Maybe,” I muttered.

“You should talk to him,” Beast said quietly.

“Yeah, well, looks like I’ll have to wait until the full moon to do that. What am I supposed to say anyway? ‘By the way, remember when we fucked last month? That was my first time. Just so you know.’ Doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue.”

He smirked, which was quite a feat considering he didn’t have human lips. “There might be a way you could do it a little sooner than that.”

“How?”

“Just ask Vera when you’re ready,” he said, standing to take my plate. “She can help.”

I wasn’t even sure I wanted to know how. Some Dr. Doolittle potion that would let me talk to wolves, maybe. That night, I didn’t have the energy to try.

Chapter Eight

I made it three nights before I gave in to my curiosity and approached Vera while she was brewing something on the stove that definitely didn't smell edible.

"Hey, Blaine," she said, smiling at me. "Hand me that dill, would you?"

I grabbed the spice tin off the rack on the counter and passed it to her. "What's that, a love spell?"

"Hardly!" She laughed. "When the snow lets up, I'm going on a little trip to fill some orders."

"A trip? You can leave the castle?"

"Mhm. I came here to lift the curse, so it doesn't affect me much. But the snow has pretty much the same effect, during the winter months."

"Right," I murmured.

"What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"You wear all your thoughts on that pretty face. You and Mattie."

I sighed. Maybe that was how my mom had figured out I had a boyfriend in the first place. Too bad we weren't even dating anymore by the time she did. "It's just something Beast said. That you might know a way I could talk to Rohan."

She narrowed her eyes, and I started to think he'd been fucking with me. "He told you that, did he?"

"I'm sorry, it was silly to ask."

"Now, hang on. It just so happens I do know a way," she said, turning off the stove. "But it's gonna cost you."

I hesitated. "I don't really have any money, but—"

"Not that," she said with that musical laugh of hers. She dipped a spoon into the broth on the stove and held it out, cupping her hand underneath to catch the drops. "I just need you to be my guinea pig."

I eyed the broth nervously. "Is that poison?"

“It won’t hurt you,” she promised, grinning.

It took me a few seconds to decide whether I trusted her enough to go ahead with it, but I hadn’t been able to get Rohan out of my head for weeks, and there were things I needed to tell him that couldn’t wait for the full moon. I took a sip of the spicy broth and my face scrunched up at the bitter flavor.

“Ugh,” I cried, wiping my mouth. “It tastes like pine-flavored fish.”

Vera snickered, and as I looked down at my hand, I realized it wasn’t there. None of me was. I cried out in panic and struck myself in the face with my own arm flailing around, trying to figure out where the hell my body had gone. It was there, it was just invisible, a fact I realized only after I’d fallen on my very solid and sore ass.

“What the hell’s going on in here?” Beast demanded, stalking into the kitchen. He looked around, frowning. “I thought I heard Blaine screaming.”

“You did,” Vera said innocently. “At least I know the potion works.”

“I’m right here,” I said, groping around for the edge of the counter to pull myself up. Beast looked about a foot to my left, his eyes searching the empty space.

“Did you use your invisibility potion on him?” he asked in an accusatory tone. “What did I tell you about using my packmates as your subjects?”

“Pack being the operative word. Blaine isn’t part of the pack.”

Beast’s eyes narrowed. “You knew damn well what I meant.” He held out his hand to me and I took it. His fur was softer than I’d imagined, and his hand was easily five times the size of mine. I clung to him since coordination while invisible proved even more difficult than with my eyes shut. I’d never realized just how accustomed to looking at my own nose I had become until it was gone.

“It’ll wear off in a couple of hours,” she huffed, folding her arms. “You wolves are no fun.”

“Come on,” Beast muttered, bending down to lift me into his arms. I yelped in surprise and draped my arms around his neck to hold on. “Let’s get you out of here before she turns you into a frog.”

“She can’t do that, right?” I asked warily, looking back as Beast carried me through the kitchen door. I heard Vera cackling as the door fell shut.

“Did she hurt you?” he asked once we were outside.

“N-no,” I said, even though my teeth were already starting to chatter. It figured he didn’t realize I wasn’t wearing a coat. He held me closer against his chest and the warmth coming through his fur was better than any parka I’d owned. “Where are we going?”

“Thought you could use some fresh air. You know, you don’t have to stay in the house, just on the grounds.”

“I know, but there are wolves out there.”

“It’s just Aavai, Birch, and Mattie.”

“I know that, but they still have teeth.”

“And I don’t?” he challenged, flashing me a toothy grin.

“It’s different. You can talk and hold a fork.”

He snorted, setting me down on a bench that overlooked the garden. Even though most of the plants had died in the cold, the frost made everything beautiful, like a sea of glass figurines. When he sat down beside me, the bench groaned in protest under his muscular frame.

“Funny, the others are afraid of me when I’m like this,” he said. “They’re puppies compared to me.”

I looked up at him, unable to hide my surprise. Somehow, I’d just assumed that Beast was always like this. “You’re human sometimes too?”

I cringed when he winced. It should’ve been obvious. He was clearly not a regular wolf. Or a regular anything.

“It’s complicated,” he said after a minute.

“How?”

“It just is.”

“Will I get to see you on the full moon, or is that complicated, too?”

He glanced down at me, but there was more amusement in his gaze than the irritation I was used to. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“I’m sure you’ll be plenty busy with Rohan when the time comes.”

I sighed. “You know, Rohan might be the ‘lord’ of the castle, but you’re the one who meets the brooding, cryptic archetype.”

“Brooding, huh?”

“Guess I can’t really blame you. I’d probably brood, too, if I was stuck in my house for that long.”

“That’s not the worst of it. Not for me, at least. Not like there’s anywhere I could go looking like this.”

“That’s not true.” I hesitated. “There are costume conventions, and Halloween... you’d be a big hit in the roleplaying community, too.”

He rolled his eyes. “Very comforting, thanks.”

“You’re kind of cool looking,” I admitted, absently stroking the fur on his enormous forearm. Sitting next to him, I didn’t even need a jacket.

“You’re certainly the first person to say that.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of girls out there who’d be bummed out when you turn back into a human,” I

said dryly.

He shook his head, but I could tell from the way his muzzle twitched that he was either trying not to smile or snarl. I hoped it was the former.

I looked down at my hands and realized I was starting to become visible again. I was still see-through, like a ghost, and I wasn't sure I preferred that state to complete invisibility. "You don't think there's any chance this is permanent, do you?"

"If it is, we'll be in good company," he said dryly. "A ghost and a beast haunting a creepy old castle."

"You know, the castle wouldn't be all that creepy if you'd let a little light in. It's not like anyone's gonna be looking in through the windows."

"I suppose not."

I stood from the bench and wandered over to a pile of snow just beyond the awning.

"Where are you going?" he called.

I ignored him, keeping my back turned as I bent down to gather up a snowball. My fingers were already numb, but it would be worth the look on his face.

"Hey." The bench creaked as he stood and I turned around quickly.

"Think fast!" I cried, lobbing the snowball at him. It hit him square in the snout and I was right. The look on his face was totally worth it.

For a few seconds, Beast just stood there. When he finally wiped the snow off his muzzle and looked up at me, I froze.

"That's it," he growled, hunching as if to prepare to lunge. But instead of attacking me, he bent to gather up a massive ball of snow in his huge hands, and I shrieked in relief and panic before I took off running.

The snowball to end all snowballs hit me in the back hard enough to send me face-first into the thick blanket of snow on the ground. Lucky damn shot.

"Blaine!" he cried. The worry in his voice was endearing, but I couldn't resist the urge to use it against him.

I jumped to my feet, but stayed in the crater my body had left in the snow so he wouldn't know I was up. I could hardly see myself against the backdrop of white, and I used his confusion to gather up another snowball before shoving it right back in his face.

"Gotcha!" I laughed, taking off at a sprint.

"You little—" He growled in half-hearted indignation and I could hear him running after me. I didn't stop to look back until the sound of his running changed, and I finally glanced over my shoulder to see him barreling toward me on all fours.

Now I was panicked.

He tackled me and we rolled down the snow-covered garden path to the bottom of the hill below the garden. Beast landed on top of me, supported by his huge arms so he wasn't crushing me, and I could feel his warmth and solid muscle through his shirt. His breath mingled with mine in smoky streams in the cold air, and for a moment that felt like a lifetime, I found myself staring up at him.

Maybe I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. Instead, I was mesmerized.

I had always kept track of my years in this world by the mundane milestones that passed, from learning how to drive to my high school graduation. It had all been as underwhelming and forgettable as I was. Tendale was the kind of place you were born and probably destined to die with little else in between to remind you that you were alive. Incredible things just didn't happen to people like me, especially not here, but I found myself staring at the most incredible, unbelievable, magical creature I'd ever seen and I couldn't look away. As impossible as he was, there was something so strangely familiar in those vivid amber eyes that seemed even more impossible.

I reached out to touch his cheek, and I couldn't stop myself. He jolted in surprise, but then he leaned into my touch, closing his eyes. My fingers danced over his fur, the warmth of him threatening to melt the snow against my back. It was only then that I realized I could see my hand, even though it was still slightly transparent.

"How'd you know where I was?" I finally asked.

"Your scent," he replied, his voice low and full of the same inexplicable wonder that had overcome me. It did something equally inexplicable to my heart, making it beat erratically.

"Oh." I hoped I was still invisible enough that he wouldn't see me blush.

He finally stood and helped me to my feet. I missed the warmth of him, even when he draped his heavy cloak around my shoulders.

"It's cold, and you're soaking wet," he said abruptly. "We should go back inside."

"Yeah," I murmured, following him back to the castle's entrance. I still wasn't sure what had happened, but as I watched him go up the stairs, I found myself fighting the urge to follow him.

Chapter Nine

That night, when I returned to my room, there was a package waiting for me on the foot of the bed. I found a note on top, written in Vera's script.

Thanks for being my test subject. Put this in your tea before you sleep when you feel like talking to Rohan.

XoXo Vera

I frowned, unwrapping the small tan package to find a cloth bag full of herbs. I was wary to try another of her potions, but when I sniffed the contents of the bag, the scent was far more appealing.

Deciding it couldn't be any worse than going invisible, I went downstairs to boil myself some water and dunked the contents of the bag in a cheesecloth. As I crawled back underneath the covers, I found myself wondering what I was going to say to Rohan if Vera's brew actually worked.

I knew what I *wanted* to say, but I also wanted to be able to look him in the eye come the next full moon.

As I sipped the sweet, citrusy tea, I felt myself growing sleepy. I yawned and set the teacup aside, intent on turning out the lights before I went to sleep. Before I had the chance, my hand fell to my side as exhaustion set in hard. Suddenly the light didn't seem to be such an issue. I curled up on my side and told myself it was only going to be for a minute.

When the bed sank down, I jolted awake and found myself staring over at Rohan. He was human again, his dark hair loose around his shoulders as he leaned in to stroke my cheek.

"How did you get here?" I asked, searching the darkness. The light was still on, but for some reason, the shadows around the bed were so heavy that I couldn't see beyond it.

"The tea," he said, looking over at the half-empty cup on my nightstand.

"Oh. Right," I murmured, sitting up. I looked at him skeptically. "Is this real?"

He smiled. "You're dreaming, but it is in a sense. I'm having the same dream."

"Oh..." The idea of Rohan having access to my innermost thoughts made me a bit uneasy. Hopefully he wasn't privy to the other kinds of dreams I'd been having about him.

“You wanted to talk to me?”

I sat up and pulled my legs to my chest, because it felt less vulnerable. “Yeah,” I admitted. “Um. It’s just, there are some things I didn’t get to tell you. You kind of disappeared.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” The sincerity in his voice surprised me even more than the apology itself. “I’m not very good at this kind of thing. It’s been too many years since I’ve interacted with anyone outside the pack.”

“What kind of ‘thing’ is this, exactly?” I asked, making a failed attempt to sound casual.

His smile said he knew exactly what I was doing. “That depends on what you want it to be. I know what I’d like it to be.”

I gulped. “And that is?”

He leaned in, his lips so close to mine I could feel the breath of his words. “I thought I made that clear the night we met.”

My face turned hot and I forced myself to turn away before he could kiss me. Or maybe he was just teasing me. He liked to do that. “You did,” I gritted out. “A one-night stand.”

He turned my chin and forced me to meet his dark golden eyes. The fire in them made my skin burn with the same need I’d felt that first night, when I’d given him everything. I wanted him so much it hurt, and I hated myself for it. “That’s not true and you know it.”

“Do I? When I woke up, you were gone,” I reminded him. Tears stung my eyes. Even in a dream, I couldn’t stop them. “I might not have a lot of experience with men, but I know what that means.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” he said softly, lowering his gaze to my mouth. I licked my lips nervously. Somehow, his gaze was even more intimate than his touch.

“You were my first,” I said, my voice quivering pathetically.

His eyes met mine, but I wasn’t expecting the softness in them. “I know,” he said quietly.

“H-how?”

He kissed me rather than answer, and like an idiot, I let him. I melted in his arms as he lowered us both onto the bed. He was scorching hot to the touch, even in a dream, and I couldn’t stand the additional heat of the clothing between us. He solved that problem easily enough, caressing my bare skin once he’d disrobed me.

“It means more to me than you think,” he whispered against my lips before he bent his head to graze my neck with his teeth. I gasped sharply as what felt like fangs nicked my flesh and his tongue darted over the small cut. When he looked down at me again, his eyes were heavy with lust. “I’m glad I was your first, but I’d rather be your last.”

“Rohan,” I breathed in awe and disbelief.

“I want you,” he continued, stroking my hair with his body pressing mine to the mattress. I squirmed beneath him, desperate to take him as I had that night. It didn’t matter if it was a dream or not. It felt

realer than any other experience I'd had in my life. "But there are things about me you don't know. Things that might make you not want me."

"That's not true," I said at the risk of sounding as pathetic as I was. My mouth was dry, thirsty for his kiss. "I don't care what you did in the past, and I don't care what you are. Maybe I should, but—"

"You don't know what you're saying," he muttered, pulling away from me.

I sat up, putting my hand on his shoulder as he turned away from me. "Don't do that. Don't shut me out when you're finally starting to let me in."

He looked back, a sad smile on his lips. "We can only be together three days out of the month, Blaine. Don't you want more than that?"

I considered his words and found I cared far less than I should have. "I wish it weren't that way," I admitted. "But I'd rather have three days with you than none."

He gave that scoffing laugh I knew so well and shook his head. "You don't understand."

"Then help me. Tell me what I need to know to help you."

He met my eyes and I could feel him searching my soul. I could feel that he wanted to believe me, but I could also feel him slipping away. "You're going to wake up soon."

"No," I said, reaching for him as he stood. I pulled the sheet around my waist and stood to follow him, but it caught around my foot and I stumbled. "Rohan!" I called as he disappeared into the darkness.

The moment I stepped forward, the shadows engulfed me and when I opened my eyes, the room was light. I looked around, struggling to come to terms with the fact that it had, after all, been a dream.

I just wasn't sure that made it any less real.

Chapter Ten

In the days that elapsed between my shared dream with Rohan and the next full moon, Beast went back to avoiding me. The castle felt lonelier than ever, and I couldn't help but feel like I had done something wrong. When I asked Vera, she assured me that Beast was just being his usual brooding self and there was nothing I or anyone else could do about it.

Just because I believed her didn't mean I stopped worrying. I was already getting attached to him, and the same loneliness that exuded from him was what had drawn me to Rohan in the first place. I got the feeling that whatever made his transformation on the full moon so "different" from the others, he would be an even scarcer commodity in the coming days.

I was waiting by the door, trying to seem interested in dusting and not like I was hoping for the others to come back. When Mattie came through the door, my attempts went out the window.

"Hi!" I called excitedly as Birch and Aavai followed him in. They were all dressed, but the fact that their fur was covered in snow and dirt made me wonder if the fabric remained part of them when they shifted. "Glad to have you back."

"Hi," Mattie said, beaming. "It's good to be back. I was getting tired of sleeping in that den. I'm too domesticated to be without a bed."

Birch seemed mildly offended for some reason and he lumbered past me, muttering something about catching up on the newspaper. Had he brought it in like a dog?

"Now that feels wonderful," said Aavai, warming his hands by the fire.

"Well, look who's back," Vera called pleasantly, walking into the room. She took one look at the muddy tracks the recently shifted wolves had left on the floor and her face fell. "What did I say about wearing those dirty clothes into the house?"

"We have company. We can't just be naked," Mattie said in their defense, wringing out his beanie.

"I'll grab a mop," I offered, darting over to the hall closet where they kept the cleaning supplies.

"I'm going to grab a hot shower and rustle up something to eat," Aavai said, rubbing his warmed hands together. "Who's in the mood for a roast duck?"

"Sounds delicious!" Mattie said happily as Vera pushed them both toward the stairs.

“Wolves,” she grumbled, wiping her damp hands off on her shirt.

“It won’t take me long to clean up,” I promised, already mopping up the puddles of melted snow Mattie and the others had left. Birch’s bootprints were as huge as I’d expected.

A few hours later, we were all seated around the dinner table enjoying the wine and feast Aavai and Mattie had prepared. All of us with two notable exceptions.

When Rohan finally came to the table, I pretended like I hardly noticed. I still wasn’t sure how much of his presence in the dream had been my own imagination, and I wasn’t going to be the first to bring it up, even though I could feel his eyes on me from the moment he entered the room.

“This looks good,” he said, in a far better mood than he had been the last time.

I let the others carry the smalltalk and found myself glancing over at the empty place setting. “Isn’t Beast joining us?”

The table fell silent and they all looked worriedly at Rohan, even though I was the one who’d asked. I couldn’t help but feel like they were waiting for his lead.

“He doesn’t eat with us,” the alpha said, taking a sip of his wine.

I frowned. “Why not?”

“He just doesn’t,” Rohan said flatly. There was something about the implication in his words I didn’t like. Did they not think Beast was fit company for the table when they were all human? The idea filled me with rage in an instant.

“I see,” I said curtly, pushing my plate aside. “I’m sorry, Aavai. The food is wonderful, but I’m not feeling very well.”

The older man watched me worriedly as I carried my plate to the sink. “If you’re sick, I’m sure Vera has something that would help.”

She gave him a look. “I don’t think he’s that kind of unwell, dear.”

“Ah,” he said knowingly.

I left the room before I could further humiliate myself or ruin dinner. Maybe I was primed to be irritated with Rohan after he’d abandoned me without warning not once but twice. I reminded myself that it might not even have been him, but either way, I wanted to find Beast and make sure he knew at least one person missed his presence at dinner.

By the time I made it to the top of the stairs, Rohan was already standing there in the hallway. I did a double-take. “How did you—?”

“This castle is old. Plenty of secret passageways,” he said, walking toward me. “I know it like the back of my hand.”

“Right,” I muttered. “In that case, maybe you can point me to Beast’s room.”

“I’d rather take you to mine,” he said, pushing me up against the wall. The sudden contact made my

head spin, and my breath caught in my throat as he pressed his body to mine, his lips so close to claiming my mouth. He ran a hand down my neck and the touch made me shiver with desire.

I pushed him away while I still had the resolve. “Don’t.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, as if he didn’t have a clue in the world.

“What’s wrong?” I echoed. “Are you really going to say that after you just implied a member of your own pack isn’t good enough to eat with you?”

He stared at me blankly. “That’s what this is about? I thought you were still upset about the dream.”

My face flushed. So it was real. “Don’t try to change the subject. Why doesn’t Beast eat with the rest of the pack? Why does he only come around when you’re not here?”

He started to speak but seemed to change his mind.

“Don’t tell me it’s complicated,” I snapped. “I’m getting sick of hearing that word.”

“And if it’s the truth?” he challenged.

“Then the truth is what I want to hear. But the whole truth, not your truncated version of it.”

He frowned and actually seemed to be considering it. He finally shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. He’s a monster. Why do you care?” When he reached for me, I shirked away.

I stared at him in shock as I suddenly felt all the disgust Beast had insisted I felt toward him. In that moment, my heart ached even more than it had when I’d woke up to an empty bed after the best and most bewildering night of my life. Tears filled my eyes as I backed away from him.

“You’re the monster,” I said in a trembling voice, turning to run back toward my room.

“Blaine!” he called after me.

I ignored him, slamming the door shut. He pounded on the door, but to my relief, he didn’t go so far as to break in. When he finally gave up, I heard his footsteps disappear down the hall and the chatter from the lively dinner below resumed. I closed my eyes and sat huddled against the door, nursing my freshly broken heart.

It was one thing to give my heart and my virginity to a man who didn’t love me, but knowing I’d given it to one who could be so cruel? That hurt more than I’d ever imagined.

The castle was full of life and magic once more, but I’d never felt more alone.

Chapter Eleven

The three days of the full moon seemed to drag on into a full month, and by the time I watched the pack disappear into the woods on the waning moon rise that followed, I was relieved. I'd promised Mattie I would see them off, but I'd said nothing about coming face-to-face with Rohan. I didn't see him with the others, but I was sure he was around. I had managed to successfully avoid the alpha during the last three days, and I hated myself for the way my heart still ached as I watched them all disappear.

The small yellow wolf at the end of the line stopped and turned back. I raised my hand to wave to him, and he let out a sad little howl of farewell before rejoining the others.

Once I decided it was safe, I left my room. I could hear Vera singing to herself downstairs in the living room as she worked on a poppet for one of the orders she had to fill in the coming spring, and I found myself tempted to explore a wing of the castle I had been actively avoiding.

Rohan's door was locked, of course, and I chastised myself for even considering going in to snoop. It wasn't like it mattered what I found. I already knew what was inside his heart, and it was as ugly as Beast feared he was.

Instead, I turned and headed into the game room, surprised to find the werewolf I hadn't seen in the better part of a week sitting down on the couch by the window, reading a book.

"Beast," I said softly. "I was wondering where you were."

He looked up at me and closed his book slowly before setting it aside. He stood to meet me halfway, and for a moment, he said nothing. "I thought you were upset with me."

I frowned. "No. Why would I be?" He didn't seem to know how to reply to that. "Would you like to play a game?" I offered when I realized he wasn't going to answer me.

"A game?" he echoed. "Sure. Which one?"

"Pool, maybe?"

"I thought you didn't know how to play." He added quickly, "That's what Rohan said, at any rate."

I smiled. "I don't, but maybe you could teach me?"

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, but he finally nodded and walked past me over to the table. "All right," he said, racking up the balls on the table. "Solids or stripes?"

"Um... stripes," I said after a minute.

His eyes glimmered with amusement. "You take decisions seriously, don't you?"

"Only the small, insignificant ones," I sighed, taking the cue he offered me.

He leaned over the table to break and three solids went into three different holes. "That's what I like about this game. Overthinking isn't necessary. At a certain point, you just have to take the shot."

"I guess so." When it was finally my turn, I missed and it was his turn again. He missed the next shot, and I got the feeling he did it on purpose.

"Here. Let me show you how to line it up," he said, reaching around me to reposition my hands.

Something was realigning, all right, but my pool skills were probably a lost cause. I swallowed hard as he bent with me, guiding my elbow back. His mane of fur tickled my neck as he leaned in.

"Now," he coached.

This time, one of the stripes actually sunk into the corner pocket. "Whoa," I breathed.

"Not bad for your first game."

"Not my first," I said, turning to face him. He still had me blocked against the pool table, and all I could think about was how warm he was. "But definitely my best so far."

He grinned and it did the strangest thing to my chest, making it tighten up and fill with butterflies at once. I looked away and told myself I was losing my mind. That smile was so familiar...

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"A little," I admitted. I felt guilty since Aavai and Mattie always went to great lengths to make such elaborate meals, but I'd been avoiding dinner in my attempts to avoid Rohan. "What about the game?"

"Oh, you're definitely going to lose," he said mischievously.

"Is that so?" I huffed. "Prove it."

He rolled his eyes, but he picked up his cue stick again. "We could always spice it up."

"How so?" I was too prideful to accept defeat without even trying, but not prideful enough to think I actually stood a shot at beating him.

"If I can win in two shots, you have to tell me why you're so pissed at Rohan."

"Seriously? That's what you want?"

"That's my offer."

"And if you can't win in two shots?" I challenged.

He thought about it. “Then I’ll tell you the secret he and Vera have been keeping from you.”

My eyes widened in surprise that he’d actually admit there was a secret. It was too great of an opportunity to pass up. “All right. Fine.”

He loomed over the table, and while he’d taken his other shots right away, the way he studied the setup and grew focused made me nervous. When he took his next shot, three balls sunk in immediately. I gulped as the rest sunk in, along with the eight ball, on his last shot.

“You hustled me,” I accused.

“It’s not hustling if you’re honest about being good at it from the beginning,” he said triumphantly, setting the stick aside. He folded his huge arms and stared me down. “Now, tell me. What has you so upset, you won’t even talk to him?”

“Why do you care?” I challenged.

“He’s the alpha. When he’s in a bad mood, we all pay the price,” he said with a shrug.

It seemed like a reasonable explanation. I sighed in defeat. “It was just something he said,” I muttered.

“About what?”

I hesitated. “About you.”

He frowned. “What?”

“I know he’s your alpha, but he’s kind of a jerk,” I said quietly. “He’s not the man I thought he was.”

Beast didn’t reply for a full minute. He just stood there, staring at me in disbelief. “That’s really what this is all about? You’ve been refusing to speak to him for days because he called me a monster?”

I tilted my head. “I never told you what he said. You were listening?”

Sometimes his expressions were fully human, and this was one of them. “I… it doesn’t matter.”

“I guess not,” I muttered. “Like I said, he’s not the person I thought he was.”

“But you have feelings for him,” he pressed.

“Right now, the only thing I feel for him is irritation,” I lied. Maybe if I kept telling myself…

“Because he insulted me?”

“It’s a big deal. If that’s how he treats his own pack, why would I want anything to do with him?”

He didn’t seem to have an answer. Finally, he took my hand and pulled me with him out of the room and down the hall.

“Where are we going?” I cried.

He ignored me, pulling me along until I finally wriggled free from his grasp. I watched in confusion as he pushed open a door further down the hall and stepped in.

I hesitated, torn between curiosity and righteous indignation. It only took a few seconds to give in, and I found myself standing in the middle of a massive study. There was a huge desk, but it was the only item of furniture in the room that wasn't draped with one of the heavy white cloths in the basement.

Beast stalked over to the window and peeled back the thick canvas curtains. I squinted as sunlight streamed in through the huge bay windows. Usually, he kept the castle so dark when the others were gone that I had a hard time adjusting to the light whenever I stepped outside.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I watched him move around the room. He dragged a piece of covered furniture over from the far wall and as he pulled the fabric off, enough dust plumed into the air to make me cough. Beneath the fabric was a huge wooden drawing desk as extravagantly ornate as the rest of the furniture, and Beast dropped a wooden crate full of what appeared to be art supplies on the chair beside it.

I ventured over and peered into the crate, finding two huge leather sketchbooks, three unopened boxes of charcoals and pencils of different sizes and shades, and a few erasers of the brand that actually worked rather than the cheap ones I used even though they always left faint lines behind and tore the paper.

"What's this for?" I asked, staring up at him in confusion.

"It's a gift," he muttered. "From Rohan. Since you won't talk to him, he... asked me to give it to you."

I blinked, not sure how to come to terms with that explanation. It was a sweet gesture, but it didn't change the way I felt. If the ache in my heart whenever he was gone couldn't change it, a box of art supplies and an obscenely expensive drawing desk sure wouldn't.

"Oh," I said sadly. "Well, tell him thanks, but I can't accept this."

His brow knit in irritation and confusion. "Why the hell not?"

"I told you—"

"Yes, I know. You're upset because he said the same thing you were thinking when we met."

I flinched. "That's not true."

"Please, Blaine. Pity's a hell of a lot worse than being called a monster."

"It's not pity," I protested. "I care about you. Is it so wrong to be offended on your friend's behalf?"

He stared blankly at me. I was getting tired of werewolves looking at me like I was nuts. "Friends?" he echoed incredulously.

"Well... yeah," I said awkwardly. "I mean, I kind of thought we were."

He hesitated, his frown deepening. "I guess so. If that's what you want."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah. It is."

"Then one friend to another, take the damn desk and supplies," he muttered. "If you don't want them

from... from Rohan, take it from me.”

“How does that work, exactly?”

He shrugged. “I’ll buy them from him.”

I thought about it. I hadn’t drawn in ages, and it was tempting. “Well... okay. Thank you,” I said, smiling up at him. “It’s a very thoughtful present.”

He smirked. “All my idea, too.”

“But there is one condition.”

“A condition for accepting a gift?”

“Mhm.”

“What is it?” he asked warily.

“I want you to tell me what you were going to before. The secret Rohan and Vera are keeping from me.”

He ran a hand through the fur on his head. “You remembered that.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember.”

He leaned back against the wall and I could tell he was trying to think of a way out of it. “It’s about the curse,” he said at last. “Guess you might as well know now. Since we’re friends and all.”

There was something to the bitterness in his tone that made me worry. Like he’d already figured out my answer to a question he hadn’t even asked. “What is it?” I asked, growing nervous.

“You’re not trapped here,” he said quietly, refusing to look me in the eyes.

I frowned. “But Vera said the curse—”

“She lied. It doesn’t affect anyone who came here after,” he said in a sullen, resigned tone. “There’s nothing you have to fear when the snow stops and you leave these woods. The animals out there aren’t dangerous.”

It took me a moment to process what he was saying. The lie was so huge, so personal, that only when I felt it cut so deep into me did I realize how much I’d come to care for these people. How much I’d come to love and trust them.

“Why?” I asked. There were so many other questions, but it was the only one that seemed to matter.

“Because the others think you’re the one who can break the curse,” he replied with a heavy shrug. “They hoped if you stayed long enough, you’d come to care enough that you wouldn’t want to leave.”

I stared at him, both hurt and shocked that he’d finally come forward to tell me the truth. “But you don’t,” I murmured. “Why?”

“Because I know how the curse is broken,” he said with a sad smile in his eyes. “And I know it isn’t

possible. Another lie I have to apologize for, but I guess it's nothing compared to the other one. The one that's kept you here."

Something about the melancholy in his voice broke my heart even more than the betrayal. "Why are you telling me this now?"

He paused as if to consider his answer. "You said we were friends," he said quietly. "I can't say I've ever had one of those before."

"What about Birch and the others?" I asked.

"They're my pack. That's different. They care about me, but only because they never had a choice."

"That's not true," I protested, desperate to comfort him even though he'd just torn my heart open with his revelation. "What they did was wrong. They should have been honest with me. You all should have." I looked away as fresh tears filled my eyes. "It hurts, but... it doesn't change the fact that I care about you. All of you. If that means staying and trying to help you break the curse, so be it."

"I told you, the curse can't be broken."

"Vera seems to think otherwise. She believes there's a way or she wouldn't keep me here."

"It doesn't matter," he muttered. "I can't go far, but I can escort you to the edge of my range and send up a flare. Someone will see it, and they'll come for you."

Before, I would have taken him up on the offer without hesitation. Maybe I should have then. After all, I was surrounded by people who'd lied to me, who hadn't even given me the chance to help them. Instead, I found myself walking closer. The surprise on Beast's face as I took his clawed hand mirrored my own.

"I'm not going anywhere. Not yet."

"We lied to you," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Why would you stay?"

I stared down at my hand nestled so comfortably in his. "Maybe you don't believe there's a way to lift the curse, but I'm never going to forgive myself if I leave without trying." I dared to look up. "That, and I can't really think of anywhere I'd rather be right now."

His gaze softened and his hand closed around mine. "You may be human, but you're stranger than any wolf or witch I've ever met."

I smiled. "Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment."

Chapter Twelve

My early days in the castle had flown by while the time I'd spent waiting to speak to Rohan again had crawled. The weeks I spent with Beast in the aftermath of his confession passed at a leisurely and surprisingly enjoyable pace. Most mornings, I woke and went downstairs to find that he'd already made breakfast. Vera had avoided me for the first few days, but she started to join us after I'd finally cornered her to tell her that as hurt as I was by her betrayal, I understood why she'd done it and wanted to move forward.

My days were split between helping Vera with her spells, walking the castle grounds and the outer edges of the forest I felt like venturing into, and drawing in the study while Beast read. While the witch insisted that telling me how I was supposed to break the spell would render me impotent to do so, I could tell she was relieved to have a willing participant.

The more time that passed, the more certain she became that I wasn't just going to leave. And the more time that passed, the less I wanted to.

There had been no major breakthroughs on the magical front, which wasn't all that surprising, since all Vera would let me do was help her with fulfilling the orders. She insisted that my presence in the castle was more than enough, and I felt a bit like a kid trying to "help" prepare a holiday dinner only to be relegated to folding the paper napkins. At least that was an actual task, if a pointless one.

The evening the full moon was due to rise, I found myself wandering the garden with Beast. There was nothing unusual about what had become our near-nightly ritual, but something felt different. Maybe it was the energy in the air. Beast had said wolves were more sensitive to it, but it was the same unseen force that changed the tides and accounted for the increase in hospital visits among humans. Everything in nature responded to the phases of the moon, and we were no exception.

Maybe it explained the strange electricity I felt whenever Beast's clawed hand brushed mine, or the fact that, without realizing it, my fingers had become laced with his. As we came to a stop at the edge of the garden, I looked up at the moon that was so close to full and felt the strangest sense of sadness.

"What is it?" he asked, attuned to the shift in my mood before I'd even noticed it myself.

"It's nothing," I murmured.

"Come on. We're a little past that, aren't we?"

I couldn't help but smile. In the last month, I had grown closer to Beast than I had ever felt to anyone in my life, friend or family. It wasn't even the long conversations we had that often stretched well into the morning. It didn't matter what we talked about, either. I'd told him about my failed relationship with Brad and my troubled relations with my parents and brothers, but casual smalltalk felt just as intimate in a different way.

I'd given my body to Rohan on my first night at the castle, but in a way, I felt like I'd given more to Beast in the time that had passed since. It wasn't something I was truly conscious of, just something that had happened without my realizing it.

Once I did realize it, it was too late to go back. It was too late to want to.

I knew what was happening. I was falling for Beast, just as I'd fallen for Rohan, and even though this descent had taken so much longer, I knew the impact when I finally hit the ground would be all the more intense. And perhaps even more painful.

"I'm just worried things will change," I admitted.

"How?" he asked, cupping my cheek in his palm. His hand was as big as my head, and I couldn't help but lean into his touch.

"This past month, I feel like I've gotten so close to you," I began, knowing if I didn't take the risk of telling him how I felt now, I might not have the courage later. "I miss the others, but when they come back, you have a way of disappearing."

"And if I promised I wouldn't?" he asked softly.

I looked up at him, afraid to let myself hope the way I wanted to. "Is that a promise you can keep? Because if not, I'd rather you didn't make it at all."

He watched me with an unreadable look in his eyes. That look scared me. I'd seen it so many times as I fell asleep curled up at his side on the sofa while he read and stroked my hair absently with those big, wonderful claws that made me shiver with joy and fear at once.

"Blaine, there's something I need to tell you," he said slowly, dropping his hand. "And I need to tell you before you say anything else, because it might change the way you feel."

"What is it?" I asked worriedly. My heart skipped a beat. Did he know about the feelings I had only just been able to come to terms with myself? It should have scared me to admit he meant that much to me, but it didn't. I wanted him to know. I wanted everyone to know, even if I didn't have the first clue what that meant for us.

He looked over at the horizon and the full moon that was starting to rise, then back at me. "It would be easier to show you," he said gently.

I watched in confusion as he sank to one knee, his huge claws pressed into the frozen earth. The snow was only beginning to thaw, but the blizzards had grown fewer and farther between. I knew whatever sense of security had formed between us would fade when the snow finally melted and getting back into town was simply a matter of walking for long enough. I had finally reached the point where I knew for certain what my choice would be.

I was going to stay. Once I was sure Beast trusted me enough to leave for a little while, I planned to find my grandfather and tell him where I was so he wouldn't have to worry about me anymore, but I was coming back. My definition of home had changed in the last couple of months to include the very place I'd once wanted to run from.

Home was the frozen, forgotten castle filled with the strange pack I'd come to love as my own family. Beast was home. How could I ever leave and not come back?

As I stared at him, I found myself lingering on the most common reason a man might sink to one knee in front of someone he'd been spending nearly every waking hour with for a whole month. Just as I'd started to think that as unexpected as that gesture might be, it wouldn't be at all unwelcome, he collapsed with a pained grimace.

"Beast!" I cried, dropping to his side. I watched as the faint reddish hue of magic washed over his skin. I recognized it from Vera's spells, but this was different. He was hurting, and there was nothing I could do. The haze turned into a thick fog, obscuring my vision, but it was over as soon as it had begun. By the time I reached through the red light, my hand rested on smooth bronze skin rather than the fur I'd grown so accustomed to.

My pulse quickened as I realized what was happening. When he finally lifted his head and I found myself staring into familiar dark amber eyes, it was no longer a question.

"*You?*" I cried, stumbling back in confusion as he stood slowly. No matter how I tried, my brain just didn't want to process what I was seeing.

"I said you weren't going to like it," Rohan said with that knowing smile. How had I ever failed to recognize it? It was the same in his eyes, no matter how much the features changed.

"How? Why?" I breathed in disbelief, torn between being hurt and bewildered.

"Would you hate me if I said it was complicated?" he muttered.

I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. "You're already in danger of that, so I'd come up with something better."

The sorrow in his expression was the only thing that held me back from turning and running at that very moment and never looking back.

"I suppose I do owe you the truth," he murmured. "All of it. If you want to leave, I won't blame you."

"Just tell me why," I demanded, afraid I'd start crying if I stayed for much longer without even knowing why either of us were there. "Tell me why you let me think you were two different people all this time."

"Believe it or not, in the beginning, it was because I thought you would never want anything to do with me if you saw me as a wolf," he said with a bitter laugh. "Then, it became a ruse for the opposite reason."

"Why not just tell me the truth? Did that ever even occur to you?"

"More times than you could possibly know." There was so much sadness in his voice, and it tugged at

the strings to my heart when I wanted only to feel the anger and betrayal. “I love you, Blaine. I think I’ve loved you from the moment I met you, maybe even before that, but I’m so ill-equipped to show it, as you know well. As Beast, it was different... the way you related to me. At first, I thought I’d just keep the lie up for a little while and get to know you while your guard was down in a way it never would have been when I was like this.”

“You didn’t really give me the chance, did you?” I shot back. “All of you just make these decisions about what to keep from me, what’s best for me, what I really think and feel, but you never stop to just ask.”

“No,” he said sadly. “And I take full responsibility for that. The rest of the pack was just trying to help. They thought you would fear me if you saw me for what I truly am, that it would keep you from...” He trailed off.

“Keep me from what?” I insisted, not about to let him get away with cryptic remarks and half-truths. Not anymore. “If you want me to stay, you need to start telling me the truth. All of it.”

His smile broke my heart yet again. “That’s just it, Blaine. I don’t want you to stay. My whole life, and it’s been a long one, has been spent in selfish indulgence. With you, I find that I want to be something else. Something I can never truly be. I want to give you things that simply aren’t mine to give. You don’t belong here, and I’ve already condemned my pack to a life of pointless suffering. I won’t condemn another innocent to the same.”

For a few long moments, I stood across from him, warring between the urge to slap him and the urge to kiss him. The latter won out, but it was a close contest. He stiffened in surprise, but he finally returned it. His lips were smooth and warm, and my body was all too quick to forgive him even though my will was holding on.

I finally pulled away, my eyes burning with rage as I took his hand and started pulling him back towards the castle.

“Where are we going?” he asked, stumbling along after me.

I ignored him the way he was so fond of ignoring me. When I pushed the front door open, everyone was gathered in the living room.

“There you are!” Mattie called, standing. “We were wondering where—”

I strode past them all and pulled Rohan-slash-Beast or whoever the hell he really was along with me up the stairs.

“O-okay, bye,” Mattie called. I heard him whisper to the others, “What’s that about?”

“That is none of our business, my dear boy,” Aavai said in a knowing tone.

When we reached the top of the stairs, Rohan finally got the upper hand and took me by the shoulders. “Would you just tell me what you’re thinking?” he pleaded.

I kissed him again, balling his cloak up in my fist and pulling him into his bedroom. He broke the kiss and shut the door, understanding tinting his expression as he looked me over.

“I suppose that’s clear enough,” he murmured, shrugging out of his cloak. I peeled my shirt over my head, and by the time I could see again, he was right in front of me.

The first time we’d fucked, I found myself hoping for more gentleness, but now, between the anger in my veins and the relief that came with the coalescence of the competing feelings that had been warring in my heart for the better part of a month, the need I felt was nothing short of violent. I took his face in my hands, relishing the texture of his stubble under my fingertips as I kissed him again.

He pinned me to the bed, seeming to understand my unspoken need as he ravished my neck with his kisses and his teeth. I dug my nails into his hair and arched beneath him, forgetting that I had every bit as much power to rid us both of the clothing that remained between us as he did.

He let out a low growl in response as he snapped my fly open and tugged my jeans off. I wanted to taste him, but I wanted him inside of me more. As I lay back, he pushed my legs open and I fumbled in the bedside drawer for the lubricant we’d used last time. There wasn’t much left, but he was already leaking so much precum and I was already so hungry for him that I decided it didn’t matter if we used enough.

When he entered me, I gasped sharply and he froze as if he’d just remembered that he was fucking a fragile human and not another person who turned into a near-immortal beast for most of the moon cycle.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, stroking my cheek in consolation. “Are you all right?”

“I will be if you stop talking and fuck me,” I growled back. “Considering you’re too fucking huge in your other form.”

The surprise in his gaze quickly turned to lust and he bucked his hips forward, his slick shaft sliding deeper inside of me. I muffled my cry in his shoulder and wrapped my arms and legs around him at the same time to pull him closer. I wasn’t sure what had come over me. Maybe it was just a side effect of the strange closeness I’d felt to him lately. The same sense of magic that pulled me toward the forest whenever I’d hear a call from the pack, as if my heart understood that sacred language.

Rohan’s skin was hot to the touch as always, and he burned inside of me, but I needed more. I needed more of him. I needed the man I craved and the one who’d become my best friend to become one in my heart the way they were in reality. As he fucked me, ruthlessly and adoringly, I felt the split halves of my heart mending together. So much that had troubled me and made my sleep restless made sense now, and the guilt I’d felt for loving them both eased with his every caress.

I was still furious, but having a physical outlet for that anger was helping. He left his marks on my back and I left mine on his. By the time he’d filled me with his seed, it was just a formal proclamation of the claim we’d both left on each other’s skin.

It soothed the strange new ache in my ass, a sensation I hadn’t felt the last time. It felt like my hole was stretching to accommodate something even thicker than his cock. I squirmed to readjust, but I couldn’t move much. If anything, adjusting my position just made it hurt more.

It was such a good hurt, though.

Confused, I pulled back and looked at him. “What the hell is going on?” I asked, my voice thick with

desire. Desire for more of whatever this was.

Rohan laughed a little and brushed his thumb over my cheek. "It's a mating knot," he said huskily. "It's a werewolf thing. I didn't want to freak you out, so I didn't bury myself to the hilt the first time we fucked."

"Oh," I murmured, swaying toward him with my eyelids half-closed. I could feel the thick growth of it beneath his skin, pulsing in time with my own heartbeat and distending the soft insides of my hole. "How long will this go on?"

"An hour or two."

"Good."

He rolled onto his side, still locked deep inside me as we lay breathless, staring into each other's eyes. "You make love like a werewolf, you know that?" he asked, still panting as he lovingly traced the angle of my jaw with his knuckles.

I gave a breathy laugh, running my hands down his chest. "Again, coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was one," he purred, nuzzling me. I could still feel his cock throbbing inside of me, not quite soft. If he stayed in much longer, it wouldn't be at all. I just wasn't sure my body could take it, even if every other part of me was more than ready.

"Why do you do that?" I asked, stroking his long hair. "Nuzzle, I mean."

"Your scent," he replied, his voice slurred with sleep and pleasure.

My face grew warmer even though I was already flushed from exertion. "I see."

For a long time, neither of us spoke again. I didn't want to risk disturbing the peace that had fallen around us in the aftermath of passion that bordered on violence, but finally, the questions in the air became too heavy for either of us to ignore.

"You know this changes things, don't you?" I asked softly.

He took a minute to respond. "You're going back." The way he said it made me realized it wasn't occurring to him for the first time.

"I have to," I murmured. "For one thing, I owe it to my grandfather to see him and tell him where I'm going to be. For another, you're not going to believe I'm never going to leave you until I come back."

"No," he agreed with a sigh of resignation. "I suppose I won't."

I smiled a little. "Maybe if you weren't so stubborn," I teased.

"If only," he said, pulling me in closer until I could hardly breathe. It was worth the bliss of belonging in his crushing embrace. "I guess if you don't come back, at least I can blame it on that."

I rose to lay on top of his chest, wincing from the ache in my stretched hole, and propped my head on my hands to look at him. It was fitting that we were literally locked together.

“I am coming back,” I said firmly. “You’re just going to have to trust me.”

“Trust has never been a strength of mine,” he admitted, tilting my chin toward him to kiss me. “But for you, I’m willing to try.”

Chapter Thirteen

I waited until the full moon was over to leave, both because Vera needed time to perform the spell that would allow the pack to escort me closer to my grandfather's cabin since it wasn't yet the equinox, and because I wanted to spend as much time with Rohan as possible.

On what would be our last night together that week—or forever, if you asked Rohan—I found myself sitting with him in the study as we'd spent so many evenings.

"You know, when we do break the curse, I'm going to miss your other form," I admitted, glancing over at him as I took a break from my sketching. "You're not half as warm and cuddly this way."

He snorted. "You might, but I won't."

I paused, thinking over all the other questions I hadn't gotten a chance to ask him in the midst of the others fawning over what they thought were my last few days with the pack, and Rohan's brooding. "There's something I want to ask you."

"Hm?" he asked, turning the page in his book.

"Why do the others call you Beast, anyway? It's not, uh, not very nice."

His mouth tilted at one side. "I told them to. But it's a nickname my mother gave me when I was a ferocious pup. It's fitting."

"That's cute," I said, referring to the way he lit up whenever he spoke of her as much as the nickname itself. I hesitated as another of the castle's mysteries that I'd yet to solve occurred to me. "That's who the empty place at the table is for, isn't it?"

He didn't say anything, but I could tell from the far-off look on his face that I'd stumbled upon the truth.

"Why?" I asked softly. I'd heard of people leaving a place for a recently departed family member, but she had been gone for such a long time, and Rohan was so unsentimental that it seemed an unlikely explanation.

"Do you remember when I told you that there was a price for my attempt to gain immortality?"

"Yes, but the curse—"

“The curse was only part of it. She was the rest,” he murmured, closing his book. “An innocent who paid the price for my sins. My selfishness.”

I touched his shoulder, and I could feel his pain as my own. “I didn’t know her,” I began hesitantly. “But if she’s everything all of your memories paint her as, she wouldn’t want you to carry this guilt anymore, Rohan.”

“No,” he agreed. “I’m sure she wouldn’t have, which is all the more reason I should bear it.” He cleared his throat, standing. “The moon will be full soon. Vera should be finished with her spell.”

I searched his face, frowning. “Please don’t shut me out like that. Not after everything we’ve overcome together.”

“I know you think you’re coming back,” he said softly, taking my hand. “I know you mean it now, but once you’re free, you’ll feel differently. You’ll realize there’s more out there than I could ever give you outside these castle walls.”

“Rohan—”

“Please, don’t argue. It’s not going to convince me, and I don’t want you to feel guilt for making the choice that’s best for you.” He turned away and reached for something inside the desk. It was a thick leather wallet that zipped at the top, and I frowned in confusion as he handed it to me. “Take this.”

“What is it?” I asked, almost afraid to open it.

“Just open it and you’ll see.”

When I finally got the courage to unzip the pouch, I gasped at the sight of more cash than my family earned in a full year stuffed inside. “Rohan,” I growled, shoving it back into his hands. “That’s not—what is this?”

“It’s insurance that if you do return, it won’t be because you think there are no better options for you out there.”

The resignation in his tone stung, but the pain in his eyes kept me from being insulted. “Fine,” I muttered, shoving the wallet into the bag I’d packed the night before so I wouldn’t have to think about it right before I left. “But it’s not my fault if I get mugged on my way back.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “There’s more where that came from, but it’s plenty to get you to California if you come to your senses.”

“What is it with you people and California?” I cried in exasperation. “I roast if I’m out in the sun for five minutes. Do I look like a beach bro?”

He chuckled, leaning in to kiss my forehead. “You do not,” he conceded. “Vera and the others will be waiting for you downstairs.”

I frowned. “You’re not coming?”

“I’m sorry,” he said in a tone that made it clear his mind was already made up. “Try to understand, Blaine. This is goodbye for me, and I can’t bear to say that to you.”

I pursed my lips. There were so many words I wanted to say to him, so many arguments I hoped could get through, if I just had the time. I knew it was wishful thinking. The only way it was getting through to him how much I cared about him—about all of them—would be the moment I came walking back through the castle door.

“I’ll be back soon,” I promised, leaning up to kiss him. He took me into his arms and kissed me even harder. I knew he was only kissing me like that because to him, this was goodbye, but when he finally let me go, I had a hard time remembering why I had to leave at all.

Before I could change my mind, I turned and left the room. It felt like I was leaving my heart behind with him, but I forced myself to go downstairs. Sure enough, Vera and the others were gathered with tears in their eyes and somber scowls on their faces.

“Would you all stop that?” I huffed. “I’m coming back.”

“We know,” Mattie said, his voice scratchy as he ran to throw his arms around me. “But just in case.”

I sighed, returning his embrace. “Well, come on, we may as well make it a group hug.”

Vera threw her arms around us both, and Aavai enveloped us all in a crushing hug that made it impossible for me to breathe. I’d be lucky if I survived the temporary goodbye long enough to see my grandfather. Birch stayed where he was, his arms folded as he leaned against the door, but even his expression was more sullen than usual.

“You take care of yourself, Blaine,” Vera whispered, kissing my cheek.

“I will. Take care of them until I’m back, all right?” I said pointedly, smiling at her as the others finally let me go. “Two days, three at the most.”

Her smile quivered. “Mhm.”

I slung my bag over my shoulder and decided to get it over with. The moon was starting to rise on the horizon, and I could tell the others were getting antsy like they did whenever they were about to go into a shift.

Birch left through the front door and I heard the sound of something scraping through the snow as he pulled a huge sled around from the side of the castle.

“What’s that?”

“The curse keeps us penned in, but it’s still a hike on human legs,” said Aavai. “It’ll be easier if Birch pulls you.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that?” I asked warily. I knew I was far from the burly wolf’s favorite person, and I couldn’t imagine he was too eager to be my sled dog.

He smirked. “Just try not to fall off.”

I gulped as Mattie loaded my bag onto the front of the sled. I took my place as Birch hunched down to shift into the same huge dark wolf I’d been sure was going to be the last thing I saw months earlier. Mattie hooked him up to the sled before he shifted along with Aavai, and I looked back toward the

door to find Vera watching us.

The defeat on her face was plain as day, and I knew what she was thinking. It was the same thing they were all thinking.

They were sure I was leaving and never coming back, and their chance at breaking the curse was going along with me. It hurt to know I was causing them so much pain, and if it hadn't been for my grandfather, I would have been happy to let the rest of my family wonder what had become of me. After all, they hadn't cared about sending me to my death because I loved the wrong gender.

I told myself this would be the last time I was separated from Rohan and the rest of the pack, and that from then on, we'd be a family.

As Birch took off at a gallop that made my head spin and the snow-covered pine trees flew past, the thrill of running with the pack, even if I was only being pulled along like cargo, started to replace the guilt and fear. How they thought I'd have my eyes opened to a world of magic and wonder like the one they'd shown me and choose to return to Tendale, I'd never understand.

It looked like I would just have to show them.

Chapter Fourteen

The pack could only take me so far before I had to make the rest of the journey alone. As I climbed off the sled and threw my bag over my shoulder, Mattie approached with his ears down and his tail between his legs. As I knelt to stroke his soft yellow fur, he whined and leaned into my hand.

"I'll be back soon," I promised, laughing as Aavai came over to lick my cheek. Birch stood off to the side, watching. "Thanks for the ride," I said, smiling at him.

He snorted and his breath puffed a cloud of white into the frigid air before he turned and loped off, dragging the empty sled behind him. Mattie turned, his tail brushing my arm as he trotted off in pursuit and pounced on the back of the sled to hitch a ride.

Aavai stayed where he was, nodding for me to go on. I turned and walked toward the clearing where my grandfather's cabin sat. It wasn't long before the cabin and its yard full of familiar whimsically carved tree trunks came into view, but it was strange that there was no smoke billowing out of the chimney. My grandfather had solar panels, but he always preferred a good fire.

I went to the door and knocked, but when no one answered, I tried again. Still nothing. I peered in through the windows, but I couldn't see anyone moving around inside the one-room home, so I waited a moment before deciding to check underneath the rug for a spare key. Sure enough, it was right where it had been the last time I visited.

I turned the doorknob on instinct and realized I didn't even need the key. It was unlocked. I pushed the door open and stepped inside, looking around the packed cabin. There were shelves upon shelves of books and dirty dishes lined the mantle over the cold fireplace. My grandfather's favorite chair still had a blanket draped over it, and an open beer bottle sat on his TV stand.

He must have stepped out. My timing never had been good. I knew he wouldn't be out for long, so I peeled off my wet coat and boots and threw a few logs on the fire so I could warm myself while I waited for him. I checked his cabinets to make sure he was remembering to feed himself. Ever since my grandmother had passed away, he needed to be reminded from time to time to eat. It was one of the reasons I had most looked forward to staying with him.

I worried all the time knowing he was so far away, all on his own. He was as brilliant as they came, but he was the kind of person who needed someone to take care of him when it came to practical

things like paying the bills and shopping. Maybe that was why he'd chosen to remove himself from society in the first place.

After an hour passed, the dread was starting to set in. I noticed the blinking light on the answering machine. It was snooping, and I knew it was wrong, but I was genuinely worried at this point. I played through the messages, but most of them were nothing but spam calls. One was from my mother, something about a funeral. She never liked to stay on the phone for long, so even the message was short and vague.

I settled back at the table, my stomach growling. He had to be back any minute now, so I decided to whip up something we could both eat while I waited. As usual, his pantry was stocked with an odd assortment of canned goods and ingredients that didn't really go together, but he had fresh milk—at least, it smelled fresh enough—so I decided to whip up some boxed pudding. It was better than whatever you could make with old yams and casserole crumbles, at least.

When the pudding was ready and he still hadn't showed up, I was really starting to worry. Part of me wished I had brought a weapon, but I reminded myself I should just be happy I was free at all. Grandpa's shotgun was in its usual spot above the mantle, but I knew I was in more danger of hurting myself with it than actually fending off any threats. To my father's great disappointment, the one hunting trip he had taken me on ended worse for me than it did for the ducks.

I went outside and trudged through the snow to the side of the cabin only to see my grandfather's snowmobile was still there. My heart lurched in my chest. For him to be gone anywhere this long without needing to take his favorite toy, something was off. I was about to go back inside to look for the keys and go find him myself when I heard the crunching of heavy footsteps in the snow.

My hope dissipated when I saw that it was just the sheriff. Don Allen had been the town's sheriff since long before I was born, and while he wasn't crazy about having a gay deputy, I was the one who had borne the brunt of his ire ever since my relationship with Brad had leaked into public knowledge. The sheriff acted like I had gay cooties and had somehow infected his deputy, as if without me, Brad would have wifed up and made a perfectly respectable husband and father.

The sheriff stopped short, his handlebar mustache twisted in confusion as he squinted at me, like he wasn't quite sure of what he was seeing. I looked behind me, but as far as I could tell, I was the only thing that didn't belong. "Blaine?"

"Sheriff," I called, taking a few steps towards him. "Have you seen my grandfather?"

He looked me over and scowled. "We thought you'd be in San Francisco by now. Your mom said you ran off."

Ran off. That was a convenient way of saying you turned your son out on his own on the coldest night of the year. I chose not to comment on the San Francisco part. To a man like Don, it probably seemed reasonable that all of us gays would just run off to the west coast. He probably thought you got an automatic role in an off-Broadway play the moment you kissed a guy.

Who was I kidding? No way the sheriff even knew what off-Broadway was.

I thought of disabusing him of the notion that I'd "run off" anywhere, but I decided not to bother. I

wasn't going back to Tendale anytime soon. I was just there to bring my grandfather back to the castle, which was the only place I had ever really felt like I belonged. The look in Rohan's eyes when I left had been enough to break my heart, and I knew his was already in pieces. He didn't think I was coming back, but I had to prove him wrong. The sooner, the better.

"Yeah, um, my grandfather—"

"He's in jail."

"Jail?" I echoed in disbelief. My grandfather hardly even went into town except to visit the tavern on the outskirts here and there when his pension check came in. How he had done anything worthy of arrest was beyond me, not so much because I thought him incapable of committing a petty crime but because he hardly liked interacting with the townsfolk any more than I did.

"Drug charges," he said, folding his arms. He was looking me over like he thought I might somehow be part of it.

"*Drugs?*" My heart plummeted to my stomach. My grandfather was no junkie, but he did keep a pot stash in an old mint tin. Just enough here and there to have a taste for bad jokes and worse snacks.

My mother always said it was an addiction, but he'd said it was just to help him with his art when I was old enough to ask him about it. And if smoking a joint once in a while was his only vice at seventy years old, I'd always figured he was better off than my mom who was always sampling the cooking sherry.

"Marijuana," the sheriff said in a grave tone. "Caught him with a big bag of it in town."

I had a feeling by "bag" he meant barely enough to roll a joint, but I wasn't about to argue with him. "How long has he been in jail?"

"Three days."

My heart started pounding again. "Three days? Why hasn't anyone bailed him out?"

"My best guess would be that they're tired of enabling his addiction," he said in a haughty tone.

"It's not an addiction," I groaned.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "You don't smoke, do you, boy?"

"No."

His eyes narrowed even more. "I know you people are into that sort of thing."

I bit my tongue so it couldn't land me in the slammer alongside grandpa. "I'm what you'd call 'straight edge.'"

He blinked. "Oh, you finally go to one of them camps?"

"No, that's not—" I paused. Deep breaths, Blaine. Deep breaths. "Can you take me to him? Please?" I made my best attempt at puppy eyes. Everyone in town had thought I was cute once, before The Gay set in. *He'll be a heartbreaker*, they'd all said until it was clear the only hearts I was breaking were

those of my disappointed family members.

The sheriff hesitated, but it wasn't a no, so I pressed on. "He has health problems, and I'm really worried about him. I only came back here to check on him. Please? I won't cause any trouble."

He sighed. "Fine. Come on. With this snow, I had to park way down the hill," he said, motioning down the steep slope that led off the cabin's front lawn. My grandfather had chosen such a foreboding lot of land specifically because it was hard for people to get to him, but it had its inconveniences.

After putting out the fireplace and getting my stuff, I went down to the sheriff's squad car and buckled up in the front seat. I was about to ask him not to tell Brad we were coming when he picked up his radio and barked a very official sounding code into the unit. Brad's deep voice came crackling through the line in response a moment later.

Great.

The drive back to town was long and quiet, save for the evangelical music station that was barely audible through all the static. The sheriff didn't change it. In fact, he turned it up, like somehow the fuzzy words might get to me on the way there.

I couldn't get out of that car fast enough, even though when I tried the door handle, I realized it was locked. The sheriff unlocked it and I practically tumbled out into the snow, relieved that Brad was nowhere in sight when we entered the small lobby. The receptionist greeted me with the same shock that had been on the sheriff's face.

"Blaine," she said, clearly less than eager to tell the world about the prodigal son's return. "Didn't think we'd be seeing you again. Are you in trouble?"

"No, not yet," the sheriff said, like it was inevitable. "He's just here to visit the old man."

She gave me a sympathetic look, like it wasn't any wonder that I had come to such an end when I had the "old man's" blood in my veins. How my parents had turned out so obnoxiously normal was a damned miracle, as far as most folks' opinions went.

I followed the sheriff inside and felt my fingers and toes warming gradually. The sheriff hadn't bothered to put the heat on, and while his car was warmer than the outside world, it hadn't helped much.

The jail was more or less a small hallway just out of the way enough of the main station room that the drunk and otherwise rowdy prisoners couldn't harass the officers working at their desk. Including Don and Brad, there were only six officers on the whole force.

I waited in eager anticipation as the sheriff unlocked the door that led to the small hallway of holding cells. The big one was as full as it ever got with two moody looking teenagers who seemed to be attempting to sleep off hangovers. There was a dark circle forming around the taller one's eye and the other's hand was wrapped, so they had probably been in a fight. I vaguely recognized them from my high school days, but if they were sober enough to recognize me at all, all they did was glare.

Well, maybe they did recognize me, then.

My grandfather was sitting in a private cell off to the side, and he looked just as despondent as I'd feared he would, his shoulders slumped as he leaned against the wall. It didn't look like he was hurt, at least.

"Grandpa!" I cried, rushing to the bars.

He looked up and brightened as soon as he saw me. "Blaine!" He laughed like nothing in the world was wrong as he scrambled to his feet. "Am I glad to see you! I thought you'd gotten yourself hurt," he said, reaching to grab my face through the bars.

"Watch it," the sheriff barked, like he was on some big time TV prison drama. He stood off to the side, monitoring us closely.

"What happened, grandpa?"

"This fascist police state is what happened," he grumbled, casting a pointed glance in Don's direction.

I cringed. I loved my grandfather dearly, but he did not know how to help his case. "It's okay. I've got money. I'll bail you out and we can get you a lawyer."

Don scoffed. "Fat chance finding someone willing to defend the likes of him."

"Sheriff, can we please have a minute alone?" I asked, working my puppy eyes again.

He frowned and seemed unsure when the front door slammed shut. "Five minutes," he warned before disappearing to go see who'd just come in.

I turned back to my grandfather, squeezing his hand. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"That brute was a bit rough putting me in the car, but I'm fine," he grumbled.

"Please tell me you didn't really get caught with drugs."

"Drugs," he scoffed. "I had enough for one little joint on me. One! You'd think I was running a meth lab out of my coat."

I sighed. "Grandpa, this is Tendale. You have to be more careful."

"I know, I know." He patted my hand in consolation, still searching my face in wonder. "What happened to you? Where'd you go? I know that bullshit about you running away wasn't true."

"It wasn't," I admitted. "Mom and Dad kicked me out."

He frowned. "I figured as much. Damn cowards think being gay's such a sin, but they don't think twice about lying to the elderly and turning their own son out into the wild. You could've died, Blaine."

I still had a hard time seeing someone as spry and lively as my grandfather as elderly, but I couldn't help but smile at the way he jumped to my defense. He was always in my corner, even when no one else was.

"I almost did," I said carefully. That got his attention. "I was out in the cold trying to get to your cabin when a pack of wolves surrounded me."

"Wolves?" he echoed. "I knew it! Those damn biologists down at the university said there weren't any around here, but I tell them all the time, I swear as sure as anything, there's wolves in these old woods. I hear them howling out in the Hollows damn near every night. Coyotes yap. Wolves sing."

"I know, I've seen them," I said urgently, trying to keep him on track since we were on limited time. "Someone rescued me out there, grandpa. You're not going to believe it when you meet him, but he lives in a castle. It's all the way out there, and I'm going to take you back with me. We just have to get you out of here first."

"A castle?" Now he was looking at me like I was the crazy one. "You feelin' alright, Blaine? You sure you weren't out in the cold too long?"

I sighed. "You don't have to believe me, you just have to trust me."

The door opened again and I turned, expecting to see the sheriff standing there. When I saw Brad wearing a shiny new deputy badge, my heart stopped beating entirely.

Chapter Fifteen

"Blaine."

Brad's brusque tone was unreasonable, but the look in his eyes made it clear he was relieved to see me. I just knew him too well to think the reason was because he cared.

Convincing the sheriff to let my grandfather out of jail was pretty much a lost cause, and I reminded myself that in order to actually take money out of the bank, I would have to wait until morning. Since I was even less eager to go to my parents' house than I was to sleep on the prison bench, I knew Brad was my only hope.

What a mess this was.

I forced a smile. "Hey."

"I thought you were gone. We all did."

I gulped. "Yeah, that seems to be the consensus. I, uh, had a fight with my parents."

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

"It's complicated," I muttered.

He nodded and dropped it. No wonder everyone at the castle loved that word so much.

It wasn't like it was a mystery to anyone in town what we'd fought over. The only reason I hadn't gone over to his house that night seeking shelter rather than out into the Hollows was because things had ended even worse between me and Brad than they had between me and my parents.

"Your time's up," he said, casting a cold glance in my grandfather's direction. "Come on, Blaine."

I gave my grandfather a reassuring smile and told him I loved him over my shoulder as I followed Brad out into the lobby. The sheriff was at his desk and he looked up in obvious disapproval at the sight of us together, but he said nothing. Brad was the mayor's kid, and gay or not, no one crossed him unless they had to. No one ever had except for me.

That was especially true since he'd donned that uniform.

"This way," Brad said and kept walking all the way to an office on the other end of the hall. He

closed the door and motioned for me to sit down.

"Nice office," I said, reluctantly falling into the chair in front of his crowded desk. "You uh, got a promotion, huh?"

"Yep." He was standing, watching me closely. "Where have you really been?"

"Mom kicked me out," I mumbled. "I tried to get to my grandfather's cabin, but I got lost in the blizzard and someone picked me up on the way."

He squinted at me in disbelief. "Your grandfather lives out on the edge of the Hollows."

"I know." I could tell he wanted further explanation, but he wasn't getting any.

"You hitchhiked?" The disapproval in his tone was clear.

"I found hippies," I lied, not wanting to send him off on a manhunt if he got the wrong idea. It was the kind of lie he'd believe, too. "They let me tag along if I chipped in for gas."

He gave me a look that told me he wasn't buying it. "I can't help you if you won't even tell me the truth, Blaine. If you want your grandfather to go home tonight, I suggest you start talking."

I sighed. "Okay. I went into the Hollows myself."

"It's crawling with wolves."

"I know, but there are people who live out there and they helped me. I stayed with them for a while."

"No one lives in the Hollows," he scoffed.

I shrugged. "Believe me or don't. It's the truth."

He studied me for a long moment and seemed to be trying to decide whether he wanted to call my bluff. "You should have come to me," he said at length. Evidently, I had caught him in a good mood.

"We broke up," I reminded him.

He scowled at me, his fingers laced. It was a posture he had adopted from his father, to make himself look more intimidating and serious. I had to admit, it worked.

Not that he needed to be more intimidating. Brad wasn't quite as tall or as broad as Rohan, but he was imposing, nonetheless. Handsome, too, or at least, that's what I had thought before getting to know him had ruined all his surface appeal.

"Now that you've seen what it's like to be out there on your own, I'd hope you would have had the chance to see how good you had it here," he said.

Good, I thought with a laugh I didn't dare let out of my head. Because having a shitty family who constantly harped at me for something I couldn't change was so fucking great, as was having a boyfriend who treated me like I was his personal property. I'd really hit the lottery.

"I wish things had ended differently," I said carefully, towing the line between leading him on and dashing any chances I had of getting my grandfather out of jail. It wasn't a lie. I did wish things had

ended differently. I wished they had ended sooner.

The answer seemed to pacify him. He leaned back, not bothering to hide the smug look on his face. "I guess you want me to help get your grandfather out of jail."

I swallowed my pride and kept my hands folded in my lap so he wouldn't see them shaking. This time, it wasn't fear. It was anger. "Please, Brad. You know he doesn't belong in here."

"Oh, yes. He's a sensitive artist," he said, rolling his eyes. "Like grandfather, like grandson. The fact is, he broke the law. I caught him myself."

Son of a fucking bitch. He'd probably hunted him down to get revenge. That was exactly the kind of thing this asshole would do.

"I'll beg if that's what you want me to do," I said, unable to keep the edge out of my voice. He seemed surprised, but he didn't explode like I expected. Maybe being in the precinct was holding him back.

"Say I did get him out. How do I know you're not just going to run off again?"

That was exactly what I planned to do, but for now, I decided to play along. "Come on, Brad," I said, making my voice soft and entreating. "You're the deputy now. Can't you just let him out this once, for old time's sake? I'll never ask you for anything again." *That's for damn sure, you ass.*

He seemed to be considering it and I could tell stroking his ego was working, so I tried a slight variation. "Unless you can't..."

He frowned. "Of course I can. It's just pot. Shit goes missing in this place all the time," he muttered. "It wouldn't be hard."

"Then you'll do it?" I asked hopefully.

Brad rolled his eyes. "Give me twenty minutes. You're both coming back with me," he warned. "I don't trust you out there alone with that crazy old man."

I held my tongue and nodded. He left the room and sure enough, twenty minutes later on the dot, he was back. "What did I tell you?" he asked.

I stood to thank him, hesitating when I saw his car keys in his hand. "We're going now?"

"The sheriff's in a bad mood. We don't want to stick around."

I decided to take his word for it and followed him out to where my grandfather was waiting in the lobby, collecting his things from the receptionist through a small hollow under the glass. He didn't seem happy, but I decided to be glad he wasn't asking her for his pot back. He saw me and pulled me into his arms.

"Blaine, my dear boy," he sighed, pulling away to look warily over at Brad who was filling out some paperwork at the desk. "Please tell me you didn't promise him anything in exchange for this."

I grimaced. This was the last thing I wanted to be discussing with him. "It's fine. They just didn't have the evidence to hold the charges," I said, giving his arm a reassuring squeeze.

He didn't look like he believed me, but it wasn't like either of us had any other options, so he let it drop, to my relief.

"Come on, both of you," Brad ordered, striding through the glass door and out into the cold night air.

I took a deep breath and it stung my lungs. Getting my grandfather out of jail had kept me from thinking about anything else, but now that I knew he was free and safe, all I could think about was Rohan and how I was going to get back to him.

Chapter Sixteen

After leaving the station, I had managed to convince my grandfather to let us drop him off at my aunt's house. I had to find a way to get back to the castle as soon as possible, and I had already decided that it would be better for everyone involved if I waited to bring him back another time. My aunt felt about the same about me as the rest of the family did, but she had always had a soft spot for my grandfather, and I knew the only reason she hadn't bailed him out was because my parents had almost certainly pressured her not to. That and she rarely had that kind of cash.

Brad's apartment was pretty much exactly the way it had been the last time I was there, only the table had been set upright after his last fit of rage. He was in the kitchen, leaning on the counter with a beer in his hand. Not good if he was already drinking this early. I sat at the table since my body was finally giving out from the long trip now that Grandpa was settled. Brad offered me a beer even though I was underage, but it didn't surprise me. He'd never actually cared about the law.

"Thanks," I said, forcing a tight smile.

"You left some of your stuff here," he said, nodding to a box by the door. "I can go back to your place if you need to pick up anything else."

"No, that's okay," I said quickly. He was being unusually thoughtful. Maybe my disappearance had changed him. I didn't feel anything for him and I hadn't in a long time, but it would be a relief to know that the man I'd left wasn't the same one who held a position of power he could do even more damage with. "Thanks for, um, everything."

"You always did need someone to take care of you," he said with a smirk. Drinking either made him nostalgic or it made him pissed. Hopefully tonight he was just the former.

I chose not to respond to that other than a noncommittal half-smile and knelt to rummage through the box. I'd left a pair of jeans, a couple of shirts, my belt and a sketchpad I used to carry around with me everywhere I went.

"I forgot about this," I murmured, taking it out of the box. In the months that had passed in the castle, I had gotten plenty of time to draw, and there was no shortage of natural beauty to practice sketching. As I flipped through the pages, I realized how far I'd come. It kind of made me cringe to look at my old sketches.

"Can you keep yourself entertained for a while? There's something I need to take care of in the

garage," he said.

"Sure," I said. Brad was always working on the old muscle car he'd been trying to get on the road for the past three years. I had my doubts the thing would ever see the outside of a garage again, but I was eager to have some time alone so I could plan my escape.

Maybe "escape" was a bit dramatic. Brad could hold my grandfather's release from jail over my head all he wanted, but he couldn't actually do anything about it without outing himself as corrupt. Tampering with evidence was the kind of thing even he couldn't get away with unscathed. It was mutually assured destruction.

If only the castle had a phone. Or any kind of technology beyond the plumbing system that magically worked because Vera had clear priorities.

I felt a twinge of guilt at the idea of just running. After all, I didn't have the first clue how I was going to get back. The Hollows were extremely remote and far from safe, never mind getting all the way back to the castle. The fact that Rohan hadn't said anything about how I might get back at all just drove home the realization that he didn't expect me to try.

Alone with my thoughts, I found a blank page and absently began to sketch. My subject matter was the subject of my thoughts. Rohan's beast form was terrifying at first glance, but I knew him well enough by now to appreciate his subtle majestic beauty. He was like a lion—monstrous and fearsome, but there was a kindness in his eyes that I was having trouble capturing with the crude pencil in my hands. I kept erasing and redrawing, before long, I was lost in my work.

Drawing had always relaxed me. Even though I had to hide most of my pieces since my parents would complain the things I enjoyed drawing most were too occultic, it was one of few pastimes I had been allowed to enjoy. My grandfather certainly never complained about what I drew. He'd told me once: "Art is the window to the soul, and you, Blaine, are a true artist because you only draw what you love."

Coming from him, I had taken that as the highest compliment. Even when I sucked in the beginning, his praise was enough to keep me going.

As I stared down at my imperfect rendering of Rohan, I found myself wondering. Did I love him?

When I had first arrived at the castle, I was still grieving my old life even though I had never belonged in my family any more than I belonged at school. The castle was different. Everyone there accepted me just as I was—especially Rohan. When I was with him, I felt like I didn't have to be anyone else, and for the first time in my life, I didn't want to. Whether he found a way to break the curse or not, I was beginning to realize I would never be happy anywhere else.

I was too focused on what I was drawing to hear Brad coming in or notice that someone was watching me until I felt his hand on the back of my shoulder. He gave it a squeeze that was probably meant to be relaxing, or maybe even sensual, but it just made my aching muscles twinge in protest.

"Drawing monsters again?" he asked with a laugh. "Don't you think it's about time you grew out of that shit?"

I flinched. "He's not a monster."

"No?" He snatched the sketchbook from my grasp and held it up to the light, making a show of appraising it like he was in an art gallery. "What is this, then? A gargoyle?"

"Give it back," I muttered, reaching for it only to have him pull it away.

"What do you say?"

Anger burned my throat. "Please."

He tossed the book back to me and I clutched it to my chest. "That's no way to treat someone who just let your grandfather out of jail," he snorted.

I looked away. "Sorry. I'm just tired."

He seemed to feel the slightest bit bad. Maybe. But whenever he seemed guilty, it was inevitably because he liked being a good guy, not because he actually cared. It was part of his whole power trip thing.

"You're a mess," he said. "Go clean up. You left clothes here. I'll wash the ones you're wearing."

I blinked, surprised by the offer. "Yeah, thanks. I will."

At least it would buy some more time to think of a way to extricate myself from this increasingly awkward situation. If I just left, he'd know I had only been using him, and I didn't want him to take it out on my grandfather. Or get my parents involved. If I could just wait until he passed out—and since he was already starting on his third beer since we'd been back, that seemed a likely way the night would end—I could just leave a note saying my grandfather had called for me and I didn't want to disturb him.

Once I was in the shower, I started to relax a little. My mind drifted back to that full moon night I had spent with Rohan, my head resting against his smooth chest as he traced every inch of my body with his fingertips. The thought alone made my heart ache with need.

People always talked about how love hurt, and it was something I had never understood before. *Not* being loved hurt. Being let down by the people who were supposed to love you hurt. For the first time, though, I understood that it could hurt even more to want to be separated from someone who wanted you as much as you wanted them.

Being away from Rohan had given me the clarity I needed. Now that freedom was in my grasp, all I wanted to do was give it away. I felt freer in his arms than I ever had outside those towering gates of iron. With him, even an actual prison would have felt like the whole world. But without him, nothing felt quite real.

I turned the water off and hoped Brad was winding down for the night. I pulled on a dry pair of pants, but when I reached for the shirt I had folded up in a clean towel, it was missing. I knew I'd brought it in with me. Looking around the bathroom, I found myself wondering if Brad had come in while I was in the shower. The thought made me feel a bit queasy, but if he had come in, why hadn't he said anything?

I wrapped the towel around my shoulders since my skin was still littered with bruises from the last

night I had spent with Rohan. Even his best attempts to be gentle were other people's version of rough sex. My face warmed at the memory of the marks I'd clawed into his skin that night, every bit as taken by passion as he had been.

Brad was on the couch and he looked like he had been waiting for me. He motioned for me to sit next to him.

"I don't want to get the leather wet," I said, lingering where I was.

He reached out and took my hand, pulling me down beside him. "Forget your shirt?"

"Must have," I said with a stiff smile.

He reached out and touched my cheek, a strange look in his eyes. Funny how he seemed to want me more now that I didn't want anything to do with him than he had when I was his.

His hand traveled down from my neck to my shoulder, frowning as his fingers traced the edge of one of the scratches Rohan had left on my shoulder blade. "What's this?"

"It's nothing. Just a scratch."

He grabbed the edge of the towel and with a quick jerk, my torso was uncovered. He looked over me at all the marks, his eyes widening. "It looks like you were attacked by some kind of animal."

I frowned, but I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. Something told me he wouldn't have been much happier to hear I just had a lover who liked it rough.

"Who did this?" he demanded, grabbing my wrist. Like manhandling me was supposed to make whatever he thought had happened better.

I winced. "No one! You're hurting me."

"Don't be so sensitive." He looked me over even closer. He touched the four small marks on my arm from where Rohan's hand had closed around me to keep me still as I writhed beneath him in bliss. "Someone grabbed you."

You would know, I thought, but I didn't dare.

"Who?" he demanded, a dangerous look in his eyes. When I said nothing, realization flickered in his eyes before they grew stormy. "Oh, I see. You cheated on me."

"I'd have to be with you to cheat on you. We broke up," I reminded him tensely.

If Brad had been a werewolf, the look on his face told me he would have been growling. "Who is he?" he asked again through gritted teeth.

"It's none of your business."

"It is my business if someone's laying hands on you," he snarled. I had my doubts that Brad cared nearly as much about someone hurting me as he did about the fact that I had slept with anyone other than him. "So much for saving your virginity for the man you love."

"I did," I blurted out before I could stop myself. Me and my big fucking mouth.

He rose to his feet and stalked over to get his coat.

"Where are you going?" I cried.

"To find this asshole. We're going to have a talk."

My heart raced as I tried to figure out what to do, the wheels in my mind desperately spinning over my options. Panic was quickly turning all my thoughts to chaos. "No! You don't even know where he lives."

"It won't take much to find him out in the middle of nowhere," he sneered. He reached for the radio clipped to his belt and held it to his smug mouth, looking me right in the eyes as he held down the button on the side. "Any of you guys up for a trip to the Hollows? I'm gonna need backup."

"Brad, no. Please, don't do this." If he found the castle, Rohan and the others would be in their wolf forms. The pack would try to stop them and the image of Mattie and the others getting gunned down trying to protect their territory was enough to make me sick. How could I be so stupid?

I reached for his arm to stop him and he struck me hard enough to send me to the floor. It brought back more memories than I cared to relive. My head was still spinning as the front door slammed shut and I staggered to my feet, barely making it to the driveway in time to see his squad car peeling away.

"No, no, no," I breathed, struggling to gather the thoughts in my head enough to form a plan. I had to get to the castle before Brad and the others did. My only advantage was that I knew where to find them and he didn't, but he was right. No one else lived out there, and if they made it far enough, the castle wouldn't be hard to find.

My ears were ringing so loudly it was hard to think, let alone strategize, but then it came to me. I rushed to the garage and caught sight of a spare set of keys hanging on the hook by the muscle car. The hood was up from whatever Brad had been doing to the old hot rod, but hopefully he'd made enough progress that I could actually get it started.

I slammed the hood shut and got behind the wheel, trying the keys in the ignition. I laughed in relief when the engine roared to life on the second try.

I hit the button on the remote clipped to the visor and the garage door rolled up. I didn't wait a second longer than I needed to, and I tore up the top of the car tearing down the driveway. Stealing a cop's car was probably a double felony, but all I could think about was getting to Rohan and the others before Brad did. If I didn't, nothing mattered anyway.

I made it to the edge of town and onto the side road that led into the Hollows before I caught the sight of blue-and-white lights in the rearview mirror.

"Fuck!" I cried, slamming my foot on the gas and driving straight into the forest. I managed to park in a slightly less wooded area before getting out and took off on foot. Hopefully ditching the car would buy me some time. It wasn't that much further to the Hollows, but there was still about half a mile of territory the wolf pack couldn't reach. That meant I was alone with anything else that happened to be in those woods.

Strange that the Hollows had gone from being a specter looming in the distance to my only hope of sanctuary. I pushed my legs beyond what I had previously thought capable and wound up deep in the forest's embrace. I could still hear cars on the dirt road behind me, but hopefully the pack would notice me first. To be sure, I decided to make myself hard to miss.

Yelling would just alert the police in the woods, so I threw back my head and let out my best howl. It was kind of pathetic, and there wasn't a chance a real wolf would buy it, but hopefully it would throw the police off. Maybe even deter them.

I didn't stop running, not even when I felt eyes on me from the surrounding woods. My heart soared with relief when I caught sight of the familiar blond wolf running toward me, his pretty face split into a panting grin.

"Mattie!" I cried, all but collapsing when I finally stopped. He was on me in a second, all wiggles and kisses. I buried my hands in his furry ruff and pressed my forehead to his. Our joyous reunion would have to be saved for later, though. "Mattie, listen. It's important. There are police coming, and they're looking for the castle. If they find Rohan—"

His eyes widened and I knew he understood me. He whimpered, turning his face toward the flashing lights in the distance.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

His whine picked up intensity and his eyes filled with fear. The pack was going after them. Shit. "Do you know where Vera is? Can you give her a message?" I asked.

He gave his head a clumsy nod.

"Tell her she needs to put a shield around the castle. Make it invisible so the humans can't see it. I'll try to reach the others and stop them from attacking."

He chuffed in acknowledgement and took off in a pale blur through the trees. I turned and ran in the direction of the lights, hoping I could cut them off. I knew where they were headed. The road ended where a big tree had fallen over it in a lightning storm, and the rest was overgrown with brush and vines.

I heard Mattie's howling in the distance and hoped the others could, too. His message had a better chance of reaching them before mine did.

Before long, I felt another pair of eyes on me. This time, it was the huge dark wolf I immediately recognized as Birch. He was even more intimidating as a wolf than he was as a human, and I had never fully gotten used to him, but I ran for him without hesitation.

"Birch!" I cried. "Please tell me you heard Mattie and the others are going back to the castle."

He looked at me like he was still trying to make sense of why I was there, but I took the puff of air he let out through his nostrils as a yes. He eyed the lights in the distance and growled low in his throat.

Did he think I was the one who brought them here? He wasn't wrong, but I didn't have time to explain.

"Can you take me back to the castle?" I pleaded. "I have to find Rohan."

He hesitated before grunting and lowering himself just slightly. I climbed onto his back and barely had time to curl my fingers in his fur before he took off. By the time we came within sight of the castle, blue-and-red lights were already casting ominous shadows on the stone and iron walls.

Shit.

Birch snarled and stopped at the gate, which had been wrenched open. The police had abandoned two snowmobiles there, and judging by the steam rising from them, they hadn't been there for long.

A shriek of pain cut through the crisp night air. I knew in my heart it was Mattie.

Birch took off before I had finished climbing off his back, sending me face-first into the snow. I righted myself and stumbled after him through the gate.

They were on the grounds. I would never forgive myself if they hurt any of my found family. I heard men yelling in the distance and the pop of gunfire. Brad's voice was among them, shouting about a monster.

What had I done?

"There you are!" a familiar voice cried.

A hand closed around my arm and jerked me back, spinning me around. I found myself looking into Vera's wide, worried eyes. "Mattie said you were back, but I didn't believe him."

"The shield," I cried, panting.

"There wasn't time. They were here before I could—" She looked into the distance, her lips pursing and her eyes full of concern.

"We have to help," I pleaded. "Isn't there a spell or something you can use?"

"I can't use destruction magic. I'm not that kind of witch."

"Can't you do *something* to protect them? Anything?"

She hesitated, looking me over. "No, but you can. Are you willing to risk your life?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

She raised her hand and murmured some chant too rapid and quiet for me to make out. Wind swirled around me, picking up snow in its drift. I felt a surge of energy, but nothing happened.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I made you harder to kill, but it won't last long. Ten minutes, tops."

That was all I needed. Without fully knowing if what Vera had done would work, I decided to put it to the test and jumped into the fray. It wasn't like I could do anything else.

Mattie was on the ground and Birch was standing over him, snarling. There was blood in the snow, seeping from the smaller wolf's side. He was whimpering and his breaths were labored, but he was alive. For now. Birch had been hit, too, and I saw the Sheriff aiming at him again, but the massive

wolf seemed oblivious to the wound in his shoulder as he stood in defense of his packmate.

"Sheriff!" I cried, rushing up to him. "Sheriff, stop!"

"Blaine?" he yelled. "Should have known you were involved in this somehow!"

"Please, you don't understand! They're not normal wolves. They're just trying to protect their home!"

"That yellow one attacked me," he snapped. "Get behind me. Now!"

"They're my friends!"

He squinted at me, and if there was any doubt in his mind that I had lost mine, it was gone then. I took a step forward, seizing on his hesitation. He raised his weapon in my direction. "Not another step, Blaine."

I ignored him and the surge of fear in my gut. Before I could reach him or formulate a plan for what to do when I did, a massive black blur soared over me and took the sheriff to the ground. His gun went off and I cried out at the spray of blood that hit the snow.

Rohan was on top of the sheriff in his beast form, his massive hand raised and his claws dripping with the blood that was flowing from the gunshot wound on his forearm. There were others, too. His cloak was riddled with holes and spreading pools of crimson.

He was about to rip out the sheriff's throat when I came to my senses. "Rohan, no!"

He froze, looking back at me. Confusion mingled with hope in his eyes. "Blaine?" he asked in that growling voice of his. "You came back?"

"Of course I came back. I promised I would."

"It talks!" the sheriff cried, struggling beneath the massive beast.

Rohan snarled, his attention drawn back to his prey.

"Please don't hurt him. He's not a bad person, he just doesn't understand," I pleaded.

Rohan and the sheriff stared at one another for what felt like forever. The sheriff's eyes were wide and filled with horror.

"He came onto my territory. He hurt my pack," Rohan snarled.

A whimper came from behind us and I saw Mattie struggling to get to his feet. Birch was at his side in an instant, trying to nudge him back to safety. The smaller wolf ignored him and limped forward, whining appeasingly as he pressed his nose into his alpha's fur.

"I'll be damned," the sheriff muttered. "That's the dog that saved my Hannah from the river last winter. Guess it wasn't a dog after all."

Mattie wagged his tail even though I could tell he was in great pain. He took another step forward, and Rohan snarled as the sheriff reached out with a trembling hand to touch the small wolf's forehead. Mattie leaned forward the rest of the way, pushing his forehead into the sheriff's hand affectionately.

The sheriff stared back at Rohan, who was still looming over him. "And what the fuck are *you*?"

"He's a person," I spoke up, moving to Rohan's side, taking the hand that had been poised to kill the sheriff just moments before. "He saved my life. The whole pack did, just like Mattie saved your daughter. They're *all* people."

The sheriff looked between all of us like he wasn't sure who'd gone mad. I tugged at Rohan's hand and he reluctantly stepped away, still keeping himself between us and the sheriff. Birch was on Mattie's other side, curled around the smaller wolf to shelter him, his eyes locked on the sheriff as he scrambled back and got to his feet, brushing the snow and dirt off his coat.

"They're all people?" he echoed warily, eyeing the wolves. "That's crazy talk."

"On full moons," I said in a strained voice.

"You're telling me werewolves are a thing?" he snorted dismissively, but he was still eyeing Rohan warily. "Pretty damn sure I've seen a costume like that on stage at a furry convention. Not that I went myself or anything. Just saw pictures. Pictures I didn't take."

"It's not a costume," I said patiently.

He stared down at his torn coat and the padding sticking out of the slash marks Rohan had left in it. "Guess not," he muttered.

Rohan blew a puff of air through his nostrils. "Your men are the ones who attacked my home. I've done no one any harm."

"Brad told us there was some psycho living out here who'd beat up Blaine," he said, eyeing me carefully.

"The only one who's ever hurt me is Brad," I said firmly. Rohan growled low at the revelation, but I knew the only chance we had of this not ending in bloodshed was if the sheriff was on our side. "Please. You don't have to believe me right now, but haven't you seen enough to warrant calling them off until you can find out what's really going on?"

He hesitated, reaching for his belt. Rohan and Birch growled low and I felt them tense, but the sheriff went for his radio instead of his backup gun. "This is your sheriff. All units fall back. I repeat—all units fall back now."

There was crackling over the radio, and I heard a few of the men respond with an affirmative, but not Brad. My heart quickened as I looked up toward the castle. There were a few more pops from a gun and the deep yelping snarl of another wolf.

"Aavai!" I cried, rushing forward. Rohan took off before I could get halfway up the gate.

"Wait!" the sheriff demanded, running after me. I didn't stop until I had made it up the castle steps. Rohan was already on the side of the building, leaping and swinging from the trellises like King Kong.

"Wasn't enough to be gay, was it?" the sheriff wheezed. "Had to go and find yourself a goddamn monster man."

"Lecture me later," I pleaded, climbing up over the railing that led over onto the other side of the castle and through the garden. I caught sight of Brad up ahead, his gun raised at Aavai. The huge brown wolf was quicker to sniff than strike, so I knew Brad had shot first, but that didn't mean Aavai wouldn't defend himself. He crept forward, snarling low with his hackles bristling. He didn't look hurt beyond a graze on his flank.

"Stop it!" I cried, but Rohan landed beside me with an earthshaking stomp and put out his bleeding arm to stop me.

Brad's eyes locked on me, then Rohan, full of rage. "So this is the demon you've been drawing," he snapped. "This is some Satanic shit, Blaine."

I rushed forward, breathless. The sheriff was still struggling to get over the low wall behind me.

"You heard the sheriff!" I shouted over the wind. "He told you to fall back."

"He's under their spell," he bellowed. "There's a fucking witch!"

"And werewolves," the sheriff panted, his eyes bulging as he tried in vain to catch his breath, his hands on his knees. This was the most excitement Tendale had probably ever seen. "It's okay, Brad. Stand down."

"These things are literal demons," Brad snapped. "Pastor Harold was right when he said the Hollows are filled with evil."

I didn't know when Brad had become religious, but I didn't like it, that was for damn sure.

The sheriff straightened up and pointed hard at Brad. "I don't know what's going on here, but I do know neither of us is God," he growled. "If they haven't committed a crime, it's none of our business."

He was nothing if not pragmatic, I'd give him that.

"No matter what you think they are, they deserve to live," I insisted. "They're not doing anything to hurt anyone."

"They're *demons*," he seethed again, aiming at Aavai again since he was clearly the easiest target. Then again, Brad always had been a fucking coward.

Rohan snarled and lunged without missing a beat.

"No!" I cried as Brad spun around and fired three rounds into Rohan's chest. It didn't stop Rohan from taking him down. They both rolled off the mountainside, a blur in the snow. The sheriff came up beside me, his gun aimed, but I reached out to stop him.

"Don't! You'll hit Rohan!"

"I don't know who to aim for at this point!" he barked. "This is some mess you've gotten yourself into, kid."

Aavai whimpered in confusion. "Go back to the others," I pleaded to the stocky wolf. "Get them all inside."

He hesitated before deciding to follow through and disappeared over the wall.

I threw myself down the hill after Rohan and Brad, but I'd underestimated just how much it would suck as I tumbled through the snow and struggled to right myself. By the time I got a foothold on a thick branch sticking through the snow, Rohan was retreating into the forest, trying to draw the battle away from his injured packmates.

Brad was hot on his trail, firing shots. Most of them glanced off the ground, but one stuck in Rohan's back. He let out a snarl of pain and rage before disappearing into the forest.

"No!" I screamed. "Brad, stop!"

If he heard me at all, he didn't care. He didn't slow down. He disappeared into the woods after Rohan and I heard another gunshot followed by a fierce roar that shook the forest itself. I looked around once I broke through the treeline, but I didn't see anything.

"Rohan?" I cried in hopes that he would answer. If I lost him, I wasn't sure what would be left of me. I couldn't even imagine a world without him anymore.

I followed the sound of gunfire until I heard the river rushing in my ears. It took a moment for me to be sure it wasn't just the blood rushing in my head. Brad was standing on my side of the river and Rohan was across it, staggering from the most recent bullet to hit. He looked like he was having a hard enough time just keeping upright.

"Rohan, run!" I screamed.

Brad turned on me as I ran forward, grabbing me by the arm. I yelped as he wrenched my arm back and pulled me to his chest, keeping his arm locked around me as he held me to him without lowering the gun in his other hand.

"You heard him, beast," he sneered. "Run away or come and get him. The choice is yours."

"No!" I strained and thrashed, but Brad was too strong for me to break free. "Rohan, he won't hurt me! Please, just get out of here! I can't lose you!"

He snarled, his eyes flitting between me and Brad. With a low rumble, he moved like he was going to retreat and my heart lifted. I wasn't at all sure that Brad actually *wouldn't* hurt me, but it didn't matter. I just needed Rohan to be safe. I needed him to live regardless of what happened to me.

All of a sudden, he turned and lunged across the rushing water, taking all three of us to the ground. The breath was expelled from my lungs as Rohan and Brad landed on top of me, but Rohan grabbed me and tossed me out of reach.

Brad kicked Rohan hard in the stomach. That might've shattered Brad's leg before as opposed to doing anything to Rohan, but Rohan was weak. He rolled to the side and caught himself on an overhanging branch just before he fell into the water. I rushed to his side, but as Brad recovered his gun from the snow and aimed, seemingly not giving a shit whether he hit me or not, Rohan shoved me out of the way.

My boot slid on the wet grass and I fell back. The current slammed me under just when the breath had

started to return to my lungs.

"Blaine!" Rohan's voice was barely audible through the water's roar, but something huge dove into the water after me, interrupting the current.

I saw him swimming for me, blood rising up from his wounds in the water like smoke. He wrapped his arms around my waist as another bullet whizzed past us, striking the river bed. The second one hit and crimson bubbles rushed from Rohan's mouth as he snarled. I gripped his wet fur, struggling to stay close to him as the river rapidly carried us away.

My head broke the surface for an instant, but I barely had time to take in a breath before it took me under again. In that brief moment, I caught a glimpse of Brad in the water, not far from us.

When I next opened my eyes, I was on the ground. I coughed up a lungful of water, my chest burning like it never had before. My vision was tunneling, but I could see Rohan standing over me, hunched and weak from blood loss but still snarling as he tried to protect me.

"Please," I choked. "Brad, please, don't."

"I should have known the legends were true," he growled. "The monster in the woods. The beast. To think I lost you to this thing."

"I was never yours to begin with!" I seethed, straining to get to my hands and knees. Rohan growled at me in warning.

"Stay back, Blaine."

"Yes, listen to your protector," Brad sneered. "I'll deal with you once it's dead. Its head will make a nice trophy above the fireplace. It's a shame I couldn't save the poor little runaway, but at least I got my revenge."

"No!"

He leveled the gun at Rohan's head, but the shot that was fired next came from further away. It missed its intended target, and given the fact that the sheriff was the one holding the gun, I couldn't be sure of who that was, but it gave Brad pause.

"Put the gun down, Brad," he demanded.

"Are you insane?" Brad snarled. "It's a demon!"

"That may be true, but he walks and talks just like me, and I'm not in the habit of killing people who haven't done anything wrong," he said firmly. "Put the gun down."

Brad looked between me and Rohan and seemed to be considering whether he was going to obey the sheriff's words. Rohan slumped and I moved forward to support him, even though the slight bit of weight as he leaned on me was almost enough to send me to my knees. We both sank into the grass, but just when it looked like Brad was going to obey the sheriff, he turned and aimed at him.

The sheriff didn't hesitate. He shot Brad in the chest, and he could easily have hit his heart if he wanted to, a fact I knew well since he and my father had been hunting buddies for decades. Brad

staggered and fell back into the river. I watched him struggle before he went under and the sheriff rushed down the hillside.

Before I could react, Rohan collapsed completely.

"I'll go after Brad," the sheriff called back over his shoulder, rushing to follow the river. For a man his age, he could move fast when he needed to.

I turned back to Rohan, grasping his claws hand in both of mine. "Please," I cried. "Rohan, you're gonna be okay, but we have to get you back up the mountain."

"I can't believe you came back," he murmured, like he hadn't heard a word I just said. He reached out, cupping my cheek in his massive palm. His fur was coarse and it tickled my cheek as I leaned into it.

"How could I not?" My voice was strained as I tried to hold pressure to his wounds, but which one? I settled for the one over his heart and shouted to the others for help.

"It's too late."

"Don't say that!" I snapped. "You're going to be fine. You're not going anywhere. Stay with me."

"Why?" he asked softly.

"Because I need you, that's why!"

"No..." His breath caught, like it hurt to talk. "Why did you come back?"

"Because I said I would. Because... because I love you."

His eyes widened, clear for a moment before they became glazed with pain once more. "I..."

His hand went limp suddenly and I had a hard time just holding it up. "Rohan?" I shouted, lunging forward, burying my hands in his furry chest, struggling to feel for a heartbeat. It was usually so loud, the rhythm of it lulled me to sleep. It was quiet now. "Rohan!"

Nothing. I held my hand in front of his face, but I couldn't feel his breath. "No!" I screamed, breaking down in sobs as I clutched his chest. "Please, no... please..."

The sound of snow crunching just behind me drew my attention, but I couldn't bring myself to look away from him. Whoever it was, friend or foe, it didn't matter.

Rohan was gone.

Chapter Seventeen

A hand settled gently on my shoulder, and I recognized Vera's floral scent as it enveloped me and she knelt next to me. "I'm so sorry. If only it had happened just a little bit sooner," she murmured.

I looked up at her, confusion and grief constricting my throat so tightly that all I could say was, "What?"

"The curse," she said quietly. "Chrys said it would only be lifted when Rohan found someone he loved. Someone who loved him equally in return."

"What? You knew about this all along and you didn't tell me?" I cried, looking down at his lifeless form. Pain filled me anew. "Did *he*?"

Vera wouldn't meet my eyes, but there was sadness in hers. "It wouldn't have worked that way, sweetheart. Obligation sometimes comes from love, but it never works the other way around."

"There has to be a way," I pleaded, as much to her as anyone. "He can't just be gone. He can't..."

"I'm sorry," was all she said, rising to her feet. "I'll give you a moment. I should... I should tell the others."

Numbness washed over me. Long after her footsteps disappeared in the snow, I held onto his hand, pleading it to stay warm. The moon was directly overhead by the time I laid my head on his chest and closed my eyes.

No one came to disturb us. It felt like minutes, but it might easily have been hours. I didn't know or care. I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, drenching his fur with my tears, but even sleep failed to provide shelter from the grief that enveloped me.

I only woke when a hand rested on my back, brushing across my neck and running through my hair. Rohan's scent filled my nostrils, rich and comforting. I snuggled closer, enjoying the illusion of his beating heart too much to open my eyes and shatter it. I knew it was a hallucination, a dream within a dream, but it was so beautiful, I couldn't bring myself to give it up just yet.

"Blaine..."

His voice was soft and silken like it was in his human form. I was a horrible fucking person. In my

fantasies, I could only see him the way he was before the curse, apparently.

"How long...?" His voice was hoarse and strained. "How long have we been out here?"

The sound of birds chirping roused me, but just when I was sure I would slip from the dream's grasp, I opened my eyes to find I was still in it. Rohan was there, his cloak hanging off him in strips that were sticky with blood. He was human again, but alive. Whole. I looked him over in confused wonder, my hands tracing the planes of his chest that had been riddled with holes in his other form.

"How?" My voice was thin and frail. I was too scared to speak louder, to shatter the dream. "This can't be real."

His hand pressed against my cheek and he rose to his knees. I reached out to stop him, but as his hands closed around my face, firm and strong, I realized he was in much harder condition than I was. He stared down at his own hands, seeming to notice the transformation only in that moment. I was too transfixed on the fact that he was alive at all.

"You died," I whispered. "Your heart stopped beating. Please, please tell me this isn't a dream and it's some kind of magic, Rohan. I—"

He took me in his arms and kissed me, and I knew in that moment that if this kiss wasn't real, nothing was. I gave into it wholly. The wonder of it eclipsed my doubt, and all I could feel was gratitude. I didn't know how he had returned to me or what the cost would be, but I was never letting go of him again.

"There he is!"

Mattie's voice cut through the fog swirling around in my head, and we broke off the kiss only to look up in time to see Mattie running towards us, his arms flailing gleefully.

"The curse!" he cried. "It's broken! Vera, Birch, Aavai, our alpha is alive!"

He tripped on a rock and went tumbling the rest of the way down the snowy slope as the three remaining pack members appeared at the crest of the hill, all human. It wasn't a full moon for another two weeks, but they weren't wolves anymore. By the time the youngest pack member finished tumbling down the hill, he was as much snow as he was Mattie. Before Rohan or I could stand, Mattie got to his feet and bounded all the way to us before tackling us in the most aggressive hug I'd ever received.

"Careful or you'll kill him again!" Vera cried, lifting her fluffy skirt as she rushed down the hill after us. Birch was already on his way.

"You're okay!" Mattie cried, throwing his arms around Rohan's neck, then mine. Soon we were surrounded by questions and joy and confusion, but most of all, love.

"How are you okay?" Birch asked, pulling Mattie to his side. He was eyeing Rohan's bloodied clothing like he was a zombie as the alpha rose to his feet.

"I don't know," he murmured, still dazed. I went to his side to help him, still in awe.

"The curse is broken," Vera said softly. "Sunrise. Didn't you say it was sunrise when Chrys placed the

curse?"

"Yes!" Aavai said, growing even more animated.

Mattie squealed and tackled him next. "The curse is broken!" they chanted in unison in a loud, happy song. Even Vera was grinning from ear to ear. Birch still looked like he was expecting the zombie apocalypse to break out any moment, though.

The tall werewolf looked at me, his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "You came back. Does this mean...?"

"Yes," I said, taking Rohan's hand. He looked down at me in wonder, like I was the one who'd just come back from the dead. "And I'm never leaving again."

"I knew it was you," Rohan said softly, sweeping his thumb over my lips. "I knew a long time ago that I could never love anyone else, but I never thought you could love me. Not the way I was..."

I reached for his hand, leaning into it. His skin was smooth, but just as warm as ever. "I don't care what you are, Rohan. Human, werewolf, cursed or not. As long as I can be with you, that's all that matters."

"I'll be," the sheriff muttered as he trudged through the snow and stopped a safe distance away from us. "Your ma's not gonna like this one bit."

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face, but I couldn't bring myself to look away from Rohan, either. "She and anyone else who has a problem with it can go straight to hell."

The sheriff chuckled, to my surprise, and scratched his balding head. He'd lost his hat at some point in all the chaos. "I gotta say, this isn't gonna be an easy report."

"Oh, there won't be a report," Vera said, folding her arms.

The sheriff looked like he wasn't quite sure whether or not to take her seriously. I had bad news for him. Vera rarely made threats, but when she did, she always delivered on them.

"What happened to Brad?" I asked suddenly, realizing there was a chance we were still in danger. I had known he was capable of awful things, but I'd never thought he would go as far as he had.

The sheriff's face was sullen as he shook his head. "Found him down by the falls. If I'd known he was that kind of man, I never would have made him deputy." He frowned, watching me for a moment. "If I'd known a lot of things, I'd have made some different decisions."

I managed a smile, even though I was quickly becoming overwhelmed by the prospect of all that lay ahead of us. "What's going to happen now?" I asked. "The curse is broken, but... what about the other officers?"

"Vera took care of them," said Birch.

My panic must have registered on my face, because the witch laughed. "I just wiped their memories and sent them home to their wives, sweetheart. Nothing to fret over. You know I wouldn't hurt anyone."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Good."

"You're not gonna wipe my memory," the sheriff cried, taking a few steps back from her. Now he was taking her seriously.

"We can't have you blabbing about there being werewolves out in the Hollows," she said firmly. "The curse may be lifted, but the pack's existence isn't part of it."

The sheriff turned to look at Mattie, who was clinging to Birch's arm and seemed to be enjoying the glow of sunlight on his skin. "You saved my daughter's life. I give you my word, I won't do anything to hurt your pack."

Mattie smiled brightly. "Thanks, sheriff. I believe you." He hesitated, looking to Rohan. "I just don't think my alpha will."

"Humans have a way of messing things up whether they intend to or not," Rohan said, wrapping an arm around my waist. His gaze softened as he looked down at me. "But I guess they can also fix things the same way. I've spent years isolated from the world, and now that I'm free, I'll have to start learning to trust somewhere."

The sheriff took a step forward and offered his hand. "You have my word."

Rohan shook it firmly. "I'll take it, sheriff. You saved my mate's life, and you have my gratitude."

The sheriff looked down at me and sighed. "Mate," he echoed, shaking his head. "You'd better believe I'm gonna keep this secret. They'll have me locked up if I don't."

"What are you going to tell everyone?" I asked warily.

He sighed as he turned and ambled back up the hill. "The truth," he said over his shoulder. "People go out into the Hollows, and sometimes they don't come back."

We all watched until the sheriff disappeared into the trees. Vera was the first one to speak. "You really trust that guy to keep his mouth shut?"

Rohan smiled. "Maybe not forever, but I think we've been here long enough. Maybe it's time the pack moved on anyway."

I threw my arms around him and squeezed as hard as I could. Even in his human form, all my strength couldn't even knock the breath out of him. I didn't care where we moved or what the future would bring. As long as I could bring my grandfather and I had Rohan at my side, I would be happy.

Something told me the older man wouldn't mind a change of scenery, either.

Chapter Eighteen

In the days that followed Rohan's miraculous recovery from death, Birch gradually started to relax. He still kept himself between the alpha and Mattie at the dinner table, though. The entire pack seemed to be adjusting well to life in their human forms, but Vera had to scold them every so often when their table manners lapsed from disuse.

When a full week passed without the police showing up at our door, I began to realize that Rohan's faith in the sheriff was warranted. How he could have faith in anyone after everything was beyond me, but he seemed to find the fact that I had come back equally mystifying even after so much time had passed.

Our monthly family dinners were now a nightly occurrence, only much livelier than they ever had been. At least part of that was due to the fact that my grandfather was now a regular presence at the table, regaling the pack with his lively stories. Birch was quick to call him on the tales that got too tall, but even the cranky wolf seemed to have accepted Grandpa into the pack.

My heart swelled with gratitude as I helped Aavai clear the table. Mattie was playing a song on the piano as he always did before and after dinner, and my grandfather and Vera were serenading the others with an off-key duet. It was the most beautiful music I'd ever heard.

"Excited about the move?" Aavai asked as I scraped the empty plates into the trash, since no one was eager to shift so soon and clean them the old-fashioned way. I got the feeling they were all afraid to be the first to shift on the off chance that they might not be able to shift back, and I couldn't blame them. The full moon would render it a necessity, but that was still a solid week away.

"I am. I think it's probably smart to wait a bit so we're not leaving as soon as Brad disappeared, but I'll be glad to leave this place," I admitted.

"It's the only home you've ever known."

"It is," I agreed. "But it's funny. I've realized it's not really the place that feels that way. As long as I have you all, I don't care where we are."

Aavai smiled. "That's the best kind of home. One that lives in the hearts of the people you love most."

"What about you?" I asked. "How do you feel about going out west?"

"I've never been to California," he mused. "I hear the women out there are magnificent."

I laughed. "You scoundrel."

"What's this about California girls?" Vera asked, her arms folded as she watched us from the doorway.

"Only teasing. No beauty can compare to yours, my dear," Aavai said earnestly.

Vera rolled her eyes. "Well, you can womanize to your heart's content out there. As long as I don't have to see it."

"You're not coming with us?" I asked worriedly.

"My job is done here, Blaine. Rohan only hired me to break the curse," she said with a smile. "Turns out you didn't need my help after all."

"We couldn't have done it without you. If you hadn't enchanted me, I wouldn't have been able to run in and at least try to stop Brad. Who knows how things would have gone if you hadn't been there?"

She looked at Aavai and covered her mouth. They were both snickering.

"What?" I asked, looking between them. "What's so funny?"

"I didn't enchant you, Blaine. There was no spell. I just gave you the boost you needed to use what was already there," she said softly. "You've got plenty of courage on your own, and sometimes that's more powerful than any kind of magic. Well... except for aether magic. That shit's as strong as it gets."

I sighed. "It doesn't matter. You're still part of the pack. Please, at least think about staying with us?"

"I'll think about it," she said in a diplomatic tone that made me realize she was only humoring me. "But I think you'll all be just fine either way. Your mate's waiting for you upstairs." Her eyes twinkled.

My face grew warm. "Thanks," I mumbled, brushing past her on my way up the stairs. Sure enough, the bedroom door was propped open. I pushed it open a bit more to find Rohan standing in the room, lighting the last in a sea of candles. He turned to me and smiled, offering his hand.

"What is this?" I asked, looking around at the rose petals strewn everywhere.

"You fell in love with me when I was at my worst," he said, pulling me close to him. The door fell shut behind me as he held me against his chest, and I forgot how to breathe when I looked into his clear amber eyes. "And from now on, I intend to show you only the best. Once the pack is settled, I was thinking we could get away, just the two of us—but in the meantime, I want to make the most of every moment we have."

"Sounds good to me," I breathed, entranced as he began to sway along with the faint notes coming from the piano downstairs. I had always been an awful dancer, but when Rohan was in the lead, I almost felt graceful.

"You were very brave, you know," he said. "Charging in like that to stop the pack from fighting."

"It's still kind of a blur," I admitted.

He leaned in close, nuzzling me. "As your mate, I'm proud of you. As your alpha, if you ever do anything that reckless again, you'll be in trouble." His breath tickled my neck and made me shiver.

"You're very commanding when you're my alpha," I half-teased, pulling away just enough to look up at him. His eyes were heavy-lidded and I knew he wanted me as badly as I wanted him. Even though we had the option of intimacy anytime we wanted now, I knew I would never grow tired of it. "And what might this trouble be?"

"Something creative," he purred, his lips brushing over my neck. "Something different from usual."

"I'm not sure anything you could do to me would be a punishment," I admitted. My head fell back with a moan as he claimed my neck with his teeth. My breath hitched and I wondered if this was it. If he was going to turn me.

Just when I thought his bite might break the skin, it ended. "Not tonight," he whispered, laying me down in the roses and silk. "It has to be on a full moon, and I want it to be special." His hand swept down my neck and over my chest, freeing each button as he went further down until my shirt was open. His hand slipped underneath it and the slightest touch made me shiver again.

I wanted to tell him that it would be special. That every moment I spent with him was, if only because it was a moment that he was still here. Still mine. But as he left a trail of kisses down my bare torso, I lost the ability to speak. My breathing grew shallow.

"Rohan," I whispered as he finished undressing me and settled his body on top of mine.

I caressed every inch of him and let him take the time to explore me with his hands and his mouth even though I wanted nothing more than for him to claim me fully in every way. He was gentle as he eased inside of me, filling me the way I'd come to need as much as I desired it. My hands tangled in his hair as he moved on top of me, our bodies synced to a rhythm that was all our own, a song just for the two of us. Our labored breathing became part of it, our close-pressed hearts the steady rhythm, quickening and building tension with each thrust.

"I love you," I breathed as his fingers laced with mine, pressing my hands into the bed as he thrust into me one last time.

"And I love you, Blaine," he murmured, kissing me softly as he filled me, body and soul. I craved the bite that would turn me. I needed to be part of his pack in more than just spirit, but for now, this was enough. This moment was more than I'd ever thought I would have, and I intended to cherish it. "I always will."

And I knew he would. Those were the words I had longed to hear for so long, and knowing he meant them meant more to me than I would ever be able to put into words. Rohan was still surprised I had come back, but if he could have seen into my heart, he would have understood. He would have known that from the moment I had fallen for him, my return to that castle, to him, was as inevitable as the sunrise that had turned our tragedy into a happily ever after. He would have known that for me, there was nowhere on this earth I would rather be unless he was there with me.

Maybe one day he would know, when we shared the bond of wolf and sire as well as lovers and friends. For now, it was enough to fall asleep in his arms and know that I would always wake up in

them.

Chapter Nineteen

The morning of the full moon was just like any other, except for the knowledge that it would be my last one in Tendale.

As I packed the last of the boxes that would be loaded into the moving truck, the rest to be brought over when we had settled on a more permanent residence, I indulged in a vague sense of nostalgia. Maybe Tendale was the setting of more bad memories than good ones, but the Hollows were the place I had first met Rohan and the rest of the pack—and for that, they would always have a special place in my memory.

At least I knew the sheriff's watchful eye and the continuation of the local legends would help ensure that the forests and the castle cloaked so well within their verdant depths would remain untouched.

Rohan was out with the others, ensuring everything was safe. He didn't want there to be any surprises on the road, and I had to admit, being trapped in a camper with cranky werewolves—no matter how luxurious the one Rohan had purchased for the occasion was—wasn't my idea of a fun vacation.

I was the only one left in the castle aside from Vera, who had been making herself scarce as of late. I got the feeling she was trying to get us used to her not being around and still hoped she would change her mind. The pack wouldn't be the same without her. My grandfather had taken to her as quickly as I had.

I carried the box down the stairs and sighed when I saw all the open boxes Birch hadn't bothered to seal. His idea of packing left something to be desired. Grabbing a roll of packing tape, I began closing up the boxes and stacking them so the others would have an easier time getting them loaded into the van. When I heard a knock at the door, I figured it was just one of the wolves who had shifted back early, or maybe even the sheriff stopping by to say goodbye.

When I opened the door, I wasn't expecting to find the lean, well-dressed man standing on the other side.

"Um, hi," I said, blinking.

He certainly didn't look like a lost and weary traveler. He towered over me by at least half a foot, and he wore a long navy blue coat that seemed to be made of some high-quality velvet, or a similar material. It looked like it belonged to another time, or maybe just in a costume box backstage at a theater. His face would have been handsome if it weren't so gaunt, dark shadows cast on his eyes and

cheeks by the lanterns on either side of the doorway. He looked at me through clear blue eyes that were every bit as sharp as his other features, and something about the smile on his face made me uneasy. Like it didn't belong there, but he'd pasted it on somehow.

"You must be the one," he said in a soft, entreating tone. I didn't even realize he had reached for my hand, or that I had taken his, until he pulled me over the threshold. Once I did, I pulled back, but his grasp was strong despite his frail appearance.

"Excuse me, who do you think—"

"Proto meos."

I froze. My entire body went stiff like it was made of stone, but this time, when he took my hand, my legs followed him of their own accord with minimal prodding.

"Blaine, why is the door open?"

Vera's voice met my ears, but I couldn't turn my head to look at her. All I could do was stare forward, unblinking. My eyes burned, but I couldn't close the lids.

"*You*," she said, her voice turning to a hiss. She knew this weirdo?

"Infinitus ma—" Vera's spell broke off with a pained cry.

I strained to break free, but the witch gripping me threw his coat over me. One moment, we were on the castle's front porch, and the next, we seemed to be nowhere. It was an endless white expanse, and I wasn't even sure what we were standing on. Before I could make use of the fact that the teleportation had undone whatever rigidity spell the witch had placed on me, he uttered words I was far too familiar with.

"Somnus ab angelis."

And I slept.

Chapter Twenty

When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in that awful white room. Instead, I was surrounded by tropical luxury, and I could hear the soft, deep rumble of the sea in the distance. Someone had propped me on a wicker sofa with floral padding like I was just part of the decor. I wasn't bound or gagged, though, and as far as I could tell, I didn't have so much as a bruise on me.

I looked around the room, just beginning to entertain the possibility that I was dreaming when someone stepped out from the open veranda, white curtains billowing around him.

The witch.

He had changed out of his dark coat into lighter fare with a shirt woven from some rudimentary, natural fibers and linen trousers that looked loose and breezy like everything else in the room. His face was as pale and gaunt as ever and made him look even more out of place in this sunkissed paradise.

"You're awake." There was disappointment in his voice, but it was the pity in his gaze that gave me pause. "I had hoped you would be able to slip away quietly."

"What do you want?" I demanded, moving to stand only to find that it felt like my feet had been filled with sand, keeping them from lifting off the floor. I fell back onto the padded sofa.

"*Inde evadere*," he said with a flourish of his hand. All at once, the weight lifted and I was free to move, but my legs were unsure after being out of use, so I stayed seated.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Chrys."

"Why are you doing this, Chrys? I've never met you in my life, what do you want from me?"

"We haven't met, but I know your lover well," he replied calmly, hands folded behind him as he stopped to watch me from across the room. He wasn't as threatening as he had been at the door, but I knew better than to think the mental urge to let my guard down was my own.

"So you're doing this because of Rohan? To get back at him?"

Chrys pressed a bony finger to his temple. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised he hasn't mentioned me."

He always was quick to put aside those things that didn't serve him."

My eyes widened as the pieces began to slip into place. "It was you," I whispered. "You're the witch who placed the curse on him. On all of them."

He didn't answer verbally, but the impassive look on his face said enough.

"Why?" I cried. "The curse is broken. It's over. Haven't you punished them all enough?"

"Not nearly," he hissed, his voice turning venomous. The stark change from calm to rage made me jolt. "You think a few years spent looking like the monster he's always been is punishment enough for a man like Rohan?"

"He told me about your brother," I said, my voice trembling. I had to tread carefully. There was so much that could go wrong, and I would never see Rohan or the others again. The worst part was knowing he would blame himself for not being able to save me. I knew he'd find me. I just had to buy him time. "You don't have to do this."

"I don't need a human pet telling me what to do," he snarled.

My lips began to burn fiercely, and to my horror, I caught sight of them melting together into a solid line before my mouth disappeared entirely from my face. It stopped hurting, but I still couldn't do more than let out a panicked, muffled cry.

"You're going to sit and listen," he said, reaching for a bottle of wine sitting in a bucket of ice on a cart by the door. He poured himself a glass and drank half of it before he went on. "Rohan won't appreciate the poetic irony, but you at least deserve to know why you're going to die. To know that he's the one who put you in this place to begin with."

I wanted to argue, but I was afraid of what would happen if I started sobbing in frustration, so instead, I focused on breathing through my nose and listened.

"I'm sure his version of the story differs," he said bitterly. "He always was a vain son of a bitch, twisting things to suit him. And like you, I was foolish enough to fall in love with him."

My look of shock must have registered, because Chrys smirked. "He didn't tell you that part, did he? No matter. We weren't lovers. Not in any way that counted to him," he muttered. "It was my brother he was truly interested in. His power. Werewolves age, you know. It's a gradual process, but it happens. Rohan was an alpha at the peak of power and beauty," he said with a dramatic, mocking flourish. "There was nothing he could want for, of course, except more. He wanted immortality."

I could only stare at him.

"My brother, Evan, wasn't like the others. The witches who are content to bend the rules of nature for the right price," he said, softness ebbing into his voice. "He was good and honest, and he did the right thing, even when it came at a cost. He told Rohan there was always a price for eternal life. The vampires paid it in blood and a piece of their soul each time they fed. To make a wolf truly immortal—to grant him the kind of power he desired—would require a sacrifice."

My heart ached. I knew the rest of the story, or at least Rohan's version of it. I wasn't sure I wanted to

know if there was any more to it, but all I could do was listen.

"Evan pleaded with Rohan for months, but he would not be moved. There were wars to be won against packs that have long since moved on to other wars if they haven't fallen entirely. What Evan didn't realize, for all his esoteric wisdom, was that you have to have a conscience in order to be moved by such things. Exhausted, he relented. It took nearly everything he had to do the spell, and even more to give in to Rohan's insistence that he tested his own success by plunging a silver blade into the alpha's heart," he said, his lip curling back. His hand twitched at his side and my stomach churned. It was obvious Chrys was imagining himself doing the very same thing. "It worked, of course. My brother's magic was flawless. I was younger then, not nearly as powerful, but even I could sense the shift in the air. The monster Rohan was becoming. He would be a fearsome warlord, the kind who was a plague on his own kind, just like his father had been before him."

He smirked. "But he had one weakness. That's the thing about a curse—it always finds your weakness. No matter how powerful, how invulnerable you think you are, everyone has one. For Rohan, it was his mother, Grace. A frail, sickly thing who'd barely survived her heartless mate only to watch her beloved child become one and the same. I saw it coming, and I'm sure Evan did as well. He warned Rohan there would be a price he wasn't willing to pay, and yet the brute blamed Evan when his words came to pass."

The empty place at the table flickered in my mind's eye and my shoulders sagged with grief. For Evan, for Rohan, for Grace. Even for Chrys, whose heart was clearly as torn with grief and rage as it had been that day. Rohan had been vague in his telling of the rest of the story, and now I knew why.

This was part of Chrys's vengeance—making me see Rohan as he truly was. Making me see all the flaws Chrys thought love had blinded me to.

"He didn't kill Evan," Chrys said, watching me closely. He chuckled bitterly at the shock in my eyes. "I'm sure that's what he implied, but the truth is far worse. You see, he was 'merciful' enough to give my brother the chance to right his mistake. Your lover is nothing if not magnanimous," he taunted. "Of course, bringing back the dead is forbidden, even for a witch as powerful as Evan. He would have gone insane and lost his soul in the process, but Rohan was relentless in his demands that he tried. Evan refused. You see, all dark spells of that magnitude require a sacrifice. An equivalent exchange. In order to succeed at bringing Grace back, Evan knew the darkness would make an equal demand of him. Something he loved just as much."

Pain gripped my heart as I realized the truth. The element of the story even Rohan didn't know. I shook my head, pleading with Chrys to stop. It felt like my heart was going to break if he didn't.

"Evan refused to bring Grace back because he knew if he did, the darkness would take from him the one thing he loved above all else," he growled. "Rohan. Of course, your 'mate' couldn't see this. How could he know anything of love? Of the sacrifice it required when the only person he had ever opened his heart to was the one who gave him life? I was young, but I knew there was no way for my brother to cast that spell without bringing about his own destruction. So, in a foolish bout of desperation, I did the only thing I knew to do—I took his place. I was too stupid to think of the consequences. I was as vain and certain of myself and my abilities as Rohan, I'll admit that. I thought my childish crush on Rohan would satisfy the requirements of the spell and rid us both of his malevolence, but it didn't. I was scarcely old enough to know my own heart, to realize that the blind infatuation I felt for the alpha

wolf was nothing compared to the bond of blood I shared with Evan. The spell worked, but Evan was the one who paid the price."

His voice trembled with grief, but he quickly composed himself. "His death is on my hands as much as Rohan's. My folly, his cruelty. Grace returned from the dead, but I was too weak to sustain her for long. Her soul wasn't in her reanimated body, and Rohan lost her a second time, but it wasn't enough. I knew he still didn't realize the magnitude of what he had done. I vowed that he would, and that when he did—when he finally understood what it was to love someone unselfishly, purely, to love them more than he loved himself only to lose them—this world would be rid of the both of us. Rohan became mortal again upon my brother's death, and now all that's left is to end things the way they should have ended long ago."

He looked at me again. "And that's where you come in. I suppose this means nothing to you, but I am sorry you were the one who got caught up in it. Being loved by a monster is a terrible burden, and not one person survives unscathed. In your case, you won't survive at all, but take some consolation in knowing that you won't have to spend your days with him."

Chrys waved his hand and the spell broke. My lips tingled, but I could feel they were back to normal. "Please don't do this," I said as soon as I was able to speak. "What happened to your brother was terrible, but Rohan isn't the same person he was then. If Evan was as good and kind as you say he was, he wouldn't want this."

"I didn't free you so you could lecture me," he muttered, drawing a phone from his pocket. He dialed a number and I could hear ringing on the other line. Before I could question him, I heard Rohan's voice snarling through the speaker.

"If you lay a finger on him, Chrys, I swear, I—"

"Say hello, Blaine," Chrys said calmly, holding the phone up to my mouth.

"Rohan!" I cried. "He's insane, don't come here. He just wants to—"

Chrys snatched the phone away. "He's alive, as you can tell, Rohan. For now."

"What do you want?" Rohan growled.

"I just wanted you to know," he replied. "He won't be by the time you get here in an hour or so. Perhaps if you were in the form you traded away so eagerly, you could find him, but there's no hope now. He'll suffer the way Evan did, knowing his life wasn't enough to save you. And this time, yours won't be, either. I'm at the place you brought Evan, near the equator where the veil between worlds is at its thinnest. You remember it, I'm sure. It's a bit more posh than it was then, but this time, the spell should work. Because this time, you have a fitting sacrifice."

I couldn't make out the words Rohan was saying. His voice was too low and rough with fury.

"But this is what you wanted," Chrys protested innocently. He knelt, sliding a thin white line of chalk from his sleeve. He began drawing on the floor. I recognized the elaborate etchings as a summoning sigil, but it wasn't like any of the ones in Vera's books. Something about it seemed darker, like I was looking at something profane even if I couldn't understand the intricate symbols he was etching on the wooden floorboards.

It was only in that moment, when I saw Chrys trace the elegant curves of the infinity symbol above the sigil, that I realized what he was actually doing. This wasn't all an elaborate plan to kill Rohan. It was something far more twisted than that.

"You wanted your immortality, and you'll have it," he said into the phone. "This time, you love something enough to pay the price."

Rohan's threats were cut off when Chrys hung up and stood only to crush the phone under his boot like it was made of ashes. He looked at the finished drawing, then up at me, clearly satisfied with himself.

"Come," he ordered, reaching out his hand. Rather than giving me the chance to take it, some unseen force pulled me to him like a magnet. "This won't hurt," he promised, his tone gentle as he lay me against the chalk sigil.

My limbs grew heavy again and I felt my body weighing into the floor, heavy enough that it felt in danger of sinking right through and into the earth. My breath caught in my throat as I waited for him to draw a knife or do some other awful thing to initiate the sacrifice, but instead, he took out a book that looked as old as the trees swaying over the remote bungalow and began reading in a language I didn't recognize.

This time, it wasn't Latin. The intonation in the words made me feel hollow inside, and I slipped into a trance that made speech seem pointless, if not impossible. Chrys read for what seemed like forever, but I was too lost in a daze to care.

Something in the back of my mind told me there was something I should care very much about, but I couldn't break myself free. All I could do was stare up at the ceiling and watch apathetically as the moon rose in the glimpses of the sky visible through the glass window above us. It was beautiful. Full and perfectly round. The pack might be wolves now, running freely.

Sadness gripped me, the first feeling that felt like my own since Chrys had begun reading, but it was short-lived. All the dreams I'd had of running with the pack as a wolf would come to nothing. Other than never seeing Rohan again, that was what hurt the most.

Soon, though, I lost the ability to even care about that.

I could feel myself slipping away, as if something heavy was being pulled from my chest. Chrys droned on, but his readings were more like a subtle hum mingling with the ringing in my ears than defined words. If anyone understood them, it was the bending trees in the wind, not me.

My eyelids were heavy and I could see shadows moving around the room, circling, waiting. They were waiting for me, I realized. Maybe they were the ones pulling my soul from my body, or maybe they were just waiting to consume it once it was free. Either way, I observed it all with utter detachment until I saw the shadow on the roof.

Only it wasn't a shadow. Shadows were cast by light, but they didn't eclipse it. This figure on the roof was blocking out the moon itself.

The glass overhead shattered, but I couldn't move enough to raise my hands and shield myself. Chrys was standing over me, blocking some of it, but shards still nicked my face and one stabbed into my side. I felt blood pooling in the back of my throat and coughed, an involuntary spasm as a low snarl

filled the room.

Rohan.

I saw him looming behind Chrys, and a look of utter disbelief crossed the witch's face. I wasn't faring much better. The glass in my side was starting to hurt, but it wasn't enough to break the trance fully.

I had to be hallucinating. He was a beast, but that shouldn't have been possible. The curse was broken, wasn't it?

"You... you can't be here," Chrys protested, frozen in place. It was only when a drop of blood hit my face that I realized why. Rohan's hand was clear through his chest, clutching the witch's beating heart in his grasp. "The curse is broken..."

"I have a new witch," Rohan growled. "She may not be as powerful as you, but her magic doesn't come at as high of a cost."

The beast tore his hand out of Chrys's chest and the witch crumpled to the ground. Blood poured from his mouth as he lay there across the lines of his sigil, staring up at Rohan.

"You will always be a monster," he said, his voice strained but strangely calm. It had to be magic keeping him animated this long. I strained to move, but the glass had me pinned to the floor in more than just the one spot, even if the trance was fading with Chrys' life force.

"I know," Rohan murmured. He turned to me, his golden gaze softening. I felt the moment of Chrys's death if only because the pain hit me all at once then. I cried out in agony when Rohan barely touched the long, glistening shard sticking out of my side. "Shh," he whispered, stroking my hair with his massive clawed hand, making every effort to be gentle. "It's all right. I've got you."

"You... how?" It was the only way I could put the confusion swirling in my mind to words.

He looked away, and I could feel the shame emanating from him. "I had to get to you, and my regular wolf form wasn't fast or powerful enough, even with a portal to get us closer to this place. Vera traded it for this."

"The curse is back?" My heart ached at the thought of it. Of Rohan and the rest of the pack being trapped again after getting a taste of freedom. Because of me.

"No... just for me. Only when I shift, and always on full moons. The others are fine."

I nodded, relief washing over me. I could feel myself slipping faster, even though whatever was being pulled from my chest had stopped and settled back in when Chrys's incantations stopped.

"Good. I..." I trailed off, my mind traveling at a snail's pace. I was so cold, it felt like everything took more effort than it should, even talking.

"I've got you, you'll be okay," he insisted, even though the worry in his eyes as he looked me over made it clear that he had no right to such certainty. "Blaine, I—" He broke off with a growl, probably because he thought I wasn't with it enough to respond. He threw his head back and let out an urgent howl. He was calling the pack.

The response came immediately, but the howling was far off. If Vera was with them somehow, if that was what he was waiting for, they weren't going to make it in time.

Determination blazed in the alpha's gaze as he leaned over me, taking my hand in his gentle grasp. His claws brushed over the back of my hand, caressing my wrist.

"I'm sorry, Blaine," he whispered. "I didn't want it to be this way. I wanted to give you time to make the choice, to think better of it, but I..." His voice broke with pain. "I'm too selfish to live without you. Chrys was right. I'm a monster, and I haven't changed at all. Forgive me."

It was the last he said before plucking the largest shards from my body, freeing me from the floor. The pain was agonizing, but it was nothing compared to the burn of his massive fangs in my shoulder.

I was too hoarse to scream. It felt like my skin was on fire and my heart was beating so fast, I was sure I was having a heart attack. I fell limp in his arms, but Rohan's teeth remained embedded in me, blood flowing freely from the deep marks he'd made in my flesh.

I lost enough blood to slip into a different kind of trance, and the last thing I saw before I blacked out was the pale glow of the full moon.

Chapter Twenty-One

Every so often, I woke up in a room that I didn't recognize. At least it wasn't the bungalow. I could still hear the soft roar of the ocean, though. A cool cloth pressed against my head and soothing words always lulled me back to sleep when the heat coursing beneath my skin became too uncomfortable.

Finally, I opened my eyes and realized the heat was gone entirely, but it had been replaced by another strange sensation. I couldn't feel my hot skin against the cool linens as I had when I'd fallen asleep. I couldn't feel my skin at all. It was covered by something thick and coarse that made me hot in a less disquieting way. I writhed to be free of my covering only to discover that it was part of me.

It was fur. Covering my entire body was a blanket of thick, light brown fur. My human arms and legs had been traded for the familiar yet incredibly foreign nimble limbs of a wolf. I recognized this form well, but it was bizarre to realize it was me. I staggered to my feet, and in my panic, I fell off the bed.

"Whoa!" I recognized Birch's voice immediately. He was human, sitting in a chair by the door of some strange room. The place was well-lit and too homey to be a hotel. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have realized it was full of the scents of all the people I loved, but the sensory input was too new, and it was all too much.

I bolted for the door out of instinct, but Birch dropped to his knees and blocked me. "He's up!" he cried through the open door.

I snarled and lashed out, snapping at his hand. I tasted blood on my tongue and I whimpered, realizing what I'd done too little, too late. Birch's jaw clenched in agitation as his hand bled, but he held onto me and picked me up, his touch gentle.

"Feisty little shit," he muttered.

I whimpered in apology. My vocal chords felt strange, capable of utterances I didn't understand and couldn't fully control. A familiar scent enveloped me and filled the room, drowning out all the others, making it less overwhelming just to exist. Birch placed me on the floor and I craned my head to see Rohan standing over me, human.

His eyes were soft and gentle, but there was something else in them. Guilt. "I've got it. Go take care of your hand."

Birch wasted no time leaving the room and Rohan closed the door behind him. I stared up at Rohan in confusion. He was always taller than me, but as a wolf, I barely came up to his waist. Memories of the night before—or maybe it had been many—filtered through my mind, overwhelming me again.

Rohan knelt and when his hands stroked my fur, the worry melted instantly. He leaned down and pressed his forehead to mine. "It's okay," he said, looking me over like it was the first time. "God, you're beautiful even as a wolf."

His words made my heart quicken and he laughed. Could he hear it? I could hear his pulse, loud and certain. I leaned into him, nuzzling.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, sitting back against the bed as he absently stroked my fur. It was heaven, but I wasn't sure what to make of the pain in his voice. "I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to lose you."

His words were pleading, like he was asking forgiveness. I wanted to tell him he was the one who'd saved my life and given me what I'd wanted for the longest time in the process, but all I could do was lick his cheek and hope he understood. He laughed, and seemed to. "I know you don't understand now. You think it's all fun, and maybe it's not as bad for the others as it is for me with my beast form, but you weren't born a wolf. Things won't come as easily. Shifting hurts, and you'll have to hunt..."

I wasn't eager to start snacking on fuzzy forest creatures anytime soon, and I found myself relieved that I'd been unconscious when I had shifted the first time, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I wanted to tell him that, to tell him that I knew everything that had happened with Chrys and Evan, and it didn't change the way I felt about him. That it didn't make me love him any less. That it was in the past, and whatever challenges the future held, we could face them together.

Instead, I let out a growl of frustration and dropped my head into his lap.

He chuckled. "All right, let's start by teaching you how to change back. Normally, it'll happen automatically when the sun comes up, but you started out as human, so it'll take a while for everything to work the way it should. Stand up."

I obeyed, my tail wagging of its own accord as I turned to face him. He snorted, looking me over. "You're cute."

I made a sound that was closer to a bark than I thought a wolf should be able to produce and cocked my head to the side. Controlling this body was going to take some work.

"Just distribute your weight evenly on all four paws," he coached. "Start focusing on how it feels to have your feet against the ground, the weight of them."

I followed his instructions, at least for a minute. Before long, my focus started to drift. I could hear everything going on in the strange house. Vera and Birch talking a few rooms away, Mattie humming, Aavai blending one of his smoothies in the kitchen. I wanted to see them all, to pounce, to play, to feel their fingers in my fur...

"Blaine. Focus." Rohan's voice was firm but gentle and it called me back to the present. I wanted to make him happy, even if I couldn't fully remember why we were doing this strange exercise. "You don't want to get stuck this way, do you?"

The threat was enough to sober me up. Maybe I was turning into a dog instead of a wolf. I whimpered and struggled to draw in all the threads of my attention that were focused on other sights and sounds and smells in the house and pulled them in on this one.

"Good," he said. "Try again. Think about your paws going into the ground, becoming part of it, like the roots of a tree. Then, try to imagine two points of contact instead of four."

I listened closely and followed his advice, but it was easier said than done. After what felt like an eternity, I started to feel a subtle buzzing in my paws, then it worked its way up. It was just strange at first, mildly unpleasant, but it soon became like the pins and needles sensation of sitting on a limb for too long. Something cracked at the base of my spine, sending a shooting pain through my body. I whimpered and Rohan reached out like he wanted to comfort me, but he held back.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "The first time's always the hardest, but I can't touch you."

I let out another whimper as more bones cracked and shifted under my skin. The talking in the other room fell silent as I yelped in pain and felt my spine fold in. My feet felt melted to the floor, and it was a stark reminder of Chrys's awful trick that had sealed my lips over, but that pain proved to have been nothing compared to what was in store.

Now I could see why Rohan had wanted to wait. It wasn't all fun and romping in the forest under the moonlight. There was pain, worse than any I had ever experienced, and as my body morphed and shifted into something scarcely recognizable as wolf or human, I felt as close to death as I had that night before Vera and the others found me in the woods.

My yelps became screams and at the end of it all, long after I'd gone numb, I collapsed onto my side, naked and huddled into a fetal position. He draped a sheet over me but even the light fabric felt like lead. I shuddered as he laid at my back and stroked my skin. His touch was gentle and it was the only thing that soothed the pain and heat lingering in my flesh. We were both human, but I felt like part of my soul was caught somewhere in between.

It took a while for my voice to work right. "How did you get to me?" The words came out hoarse, but they were human, and for that, I was grateful.

"I knew where he had taken you as soon as Vera told me Chrys showed up," he said darkly. "This is the place I brought Evan years ago. The place where I—"

"I know," I said softly. "Chrys told me everything." I didn't think I could bear to hear it again, not this soon.

Rohan seemed to understand, nuzzling my neck. His breath was cool and comforting against my skin, even though his teeth were the ones that had left the marks on my shoulder so recently. They had already faded to flat white scars, but I doubted they would ever disappear. Rohan had told me a long time ago that wounds made with fangs or silver on full moons always left scars. I didn't mind the idea of being marked forever, not if it meant I was his.

"He had a barrier around this place," he continued, his voice strained as if he was reliving the pain of thinking he'd lost me. "It prevented any magic from reaching him, so Vera couldn't get us any closer. We had to run on foot. He wanted me to be close enough to try to reach you, but far enough that I

couldn't in time."

"So you asked Vera to curse you again?" I murmured.

"It's not a curse if it let me reach you," he said, turning me carefully to face him and sweeping his hand over my cheek. "Now that you know everything—now that you know what I am—you still have a choice, Blaine. Maybe you couldn't choose to stay human, but you don't have to stay with me."

"I wanted this," I reminded him, my voice growing more certain as I spoke. "I wanted you. I still do, that hasn't changed."

He searched my face like he was trying to look for any sign of doubt, any sign I felt I had to say those words. I took his face in my hands, forcing him to look at me. "Listen to me, Rohan. I love you."

"I'm still a monster, Blaine. I might not be stuck looking like one all the time, but it's still in here."

"Maybe you were in the past," I admitted. "Maybe you did horrible things. Evan deserved better." Guilt filled his amber eyes. "But something tells me he wouldn't want things to turn out for you the way they did for Chrys. You can only carry the guilt with you for so long, but it doesn't really do anything. It won't bring him back, or your mother. You can't go back, Rohan, not with magic or anything else. All we have is now, and right now, I don't see a monster in front of me. I haven't seen a monster the entire time I've known you. Whatever the future holds, it's ours. Don't let the past take that away."

At first, he said nothing. I could feel him struggling, wanting to argue, but then he just kissed me and my heart skipped like it had the very first time. He pulled me closer and whispered something in my ear.

My pulse was still rushing in my head too fast to make it out, but it sounded like, "I'm proud of you."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rohan was right. The first time I shifted into my wolf form was the most painful, but the second wasn't much better. By the seventh, it was at least tolerable, but shifting back was always the hardest part.

He worked with me every day without fail and insisted it was important that I learn to master my beast now rather than the full moon, which was painful no matter how long we were wolves.

Once I could control myself, I ran with the others. Mattie first, since he was smaller than me and gentle. We played and romped in the yard like puppies, nipping and chasing and dancing around each other until we grew exhausted. Rohan said the more energy I burned off now, the easier my first official full moon as a werewolf would be.

Soon, I progressed to running with the pack. We were still in Argentina. Rohan had rented out a house in the jungle near the water and the whole pack fit in comfortably. My grandfather had stayed behind when Vera teleported the rest of the pack home, which was good, since I wanted to give him some time to adjust to the fact that his grandson was a werewolf. We weren't planning on staying in Argentina permanently, but Vera had taken a liking to the place. Magic came easier there, she said. If she was thinking of staying, that was enough to make the rest of us think about it, too.

I could hear the murmuring. Before long, everyone was thinking the same thing, but they were all afraid to voice their desires to Rohan. He was the alpha and his word was law. Even though he had changed considerably in my time at the castle, and especially since the curse had been lifted—for the most part—I could tell they still weren't used to the idea that they could approach him freely. They all knew this place carried memories with it.

So it fell to me to talk to Rohan. I was his mate now, as surreal as that fact seemed, and I had his ear in a way no one else in the pack did. I intended to use that to try and bridge the gap that had formed between them over the years. We were a family, for better or worse, and whatever it took to keep us that way was worth the risk of a few awkward conversations.

My first month as a wolf passed quickly, once the initial anguish of that first week was over. When the sun set and the full moon was due to rise, Rohan took me out on our own while the rest of the pack ran in the jungle. Their howls soothed my nerves and Rohan's hand closing around mine finished the job.

I let out a deep breath as we both stood at the top of the hill overlooking the private beach below,

watching the rose gold sun dip into the ocean. "You can do this," he promised.

I smiled up at him and nodded. "I've had a good teacher. Promise me you won't let me eat any villagers."

"I'm usually the one people worry about."

My smile melted away. Rohan's self-deprecating humor about his beast form was never something I found amusing, even though I knew it was how he coped. I wished he could see himself the way I did, the way he had seen potential in me long before I saw it in myself. I wished I could make him understand that he was everything I wanted, every part of him and every shape he took.

For the moment, it was all I could do to focus on not letting my wolf explode from my body the way it wanted to the moment the first glimmer of the full moon was visible above the horizon line. I sank to my knees and gripped my chest. I was breathing the way Rohan and the others had taught me to, but it wasn't enough, not fully. The pain was already setting in, and it was worse than the most violent throes of my first shift had been.

"It's all right," he soothed, his hand already covered in fur as it rested on my back. "Just breathe. Just feel the earth under your hands and feet."

It was only then that I realized I had fallen to my hands and knees, my nails digging into the earth. I let out a strangled cry, but Rohan's promise that this shift—while more painful than the others—would at least be faster came to pass. One moment, I was human, crouched over the earth in a desperate bid to maintain a grasp on my sanity.

The next, I was...

Not a wolf. I knew my wolf form. I had spent enough time in it that it was my second home. I knew every curve of muscle, every inch of fur, every elongated bone. This was different. This time, I was in some in-between state that reminded me of the agony of hovering between forms the first time I had shifted back to human flesh. Panic surged through me, but the pain was quickly retreating.

When I looked up at Rohan for answers, his eyes were wide and full of confusion. He didn't have the answers any more than I did.

"Blaine..." My name was a whisper on his breath. He reached out and I flinched, afraid of what he would touch. When his hand smoothed down the fur on the side of my face, I could feel that my muzzle was elongated like a wolf's. I still had ears that twitched when he touched them and I could feel the fangs protruding over my bottom lip. My spine straightened when I rose, not quite fully erect but too tall for a wolf's. When I looked down, my paws were built like Rohan's—handlike, but furred.

I really was something in between. Fear seized me as I looked back in Rohan's eyes, but all I found in them was awe. "You're beautiful," he whispered reverently, still stroking my soft fur like he couldn't take in enough of what he was seeing and touching. His eyes shone with unshed tears in the moonlight and when I fell into his arms, I realized I could still wrap mine around him. For the first time, they almost spanned his strong chest.

"I don't understand. What happened to me?" I asked. I could speak.

I felt whole. I didn't feel like anything had gone wrong. In fact, I felt... great. Like I could circle the entire forest a few times just to get started, and then dive into the ocean just to see how far down it went. My fur seemed to crackle with the electricity in the night air. It was like a layer of film had been peeled off the world and I could experience everything more clearly.

Including how fucking much I loved him.

"You're like me," he murmured. "I just assumed you'd be a normal wolf when I sired you, but I bit you in this form, so it must have..." He broke off and guilt filled his eyes again as he stared down at me. "I'm sorry, Blaine, I had no idea." Hurt filled me. He seemed to realize the implication of his words because he took my face in his hands and pressed his forehead to mine. "That's not what I meant. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, I just..."

"You what?" I asked, challenging him. "You're sorry I'm a whole lot like the wolf you've spent the last year calling a monster?"

He looked away, but I knew my words had hit their mark. "You're not a monster," he growled.

"Then maybe now you'll understand how I feel when you say those things about yourself," I said gently, turning his face back towards me. "Because when I look at you, I don't see a monster, either. I wasn't expecting this, but it's the best thing that could have happened." He frowned and I could tell he was about to argue, so I stopped him, entwining my hands with his. "I want to be your mate, Rohan. That means sharing your burdens. You took this form again to save me, so as long as you feel it's a curse, then it's a curse I'll bear with you. I just hope that one day, you can see it for what it is. Proof that we're the same in every way that matters."

He looked down at our clasped hands and let out a puff of air through his nose. "I guess I should stop complaining, huh?"

"You might give me a complex," I teased, letting his hand fall away. I began to walk down the mountainside, picking up speed as my body shifted into the posture it was most comfortable with, crouched and running on all fours.

"Hey!" he called after me. "Slow down!"

"Sorry!" I laughed, running freely along the water, relishing the way my strange paws felt digging into the sand. I was faster than I ever had been as a wolf or a human. Power surged through me, fueled by the light of the full moon. Rohan caught up with me, but not as easily as usual.

Soon, we were running side-by-side along the water. The sounds of the waves lapping against the shore and the night air rustling through the trees filled me with the sense of something I had previously only ever known in Rohan's arms. Home...

We ran until the sun rose and when we collapsed on the beach, I was so exhausted that I barely even felt the pain of returning to my human form. He was right, burning energy really did make it easier.

We were both still panting even as we'd traded in our fur for human flesh. I dragged myself to an upright position and laid on Rohan's chest, tracing every outline of the faint white scars etched in his dark skin.

"That's a lot of scars for someone who can only get them on the full moon," I said, recalling Chrys's reference to Rohan being a warlord. "Someday, you'll have to tell me how you got them."

"We've got plenty of time," he said, kissing my hand. His lips felt like bliss on my bare skin and he pulled me on top of him. I ran my hands over his chest and admired the sculpted outline of his thick biceps. "And the answer is yes," he said in response to some question I hadn't asked.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, you're always going to be this horny after you shift back on a full moon," he said with a rakish grin, running his hand along my half-erect shaft. I shivered as his languid touch finished the job.

"Rohan..."

"I love you," he murmured, his eyes darkening as they swept over me.

His hand disappeared between my legs and he slipped a finger inside to prepare me. It was easier than usual. I was too aroused to be thinking of lubricant until I realized my ass was already ready for him, slick with need. My face grew warm as I recalled reading something about it in one of the books Vera had given me about the subtle changes that accompanied werewolf transition. It was embarrassing, but it had its conveniences.

I rose enough to allow Rohan to position himself at my entrance and bit my lip to stifle a moan as he slipped in. I'd never been this ready to take him, this hungry for his touch. It seemed we hadn't burned off all our energy after all. His hands laced with mine again, providing me with support as I rode him. The steady rhythm of the tide soon became the metronome of our pleasure, and I realized that sight and sound weren't the only senses heightened after becoming a werewolf. I could hear Rohan's heartbeat quickening with my own as he groped my bare flesh, bucking his hips into me.

When he filled me, I cried out as the most powerful orgasm I had ever experienced tore through my body. It lasted longer than it ever had, and by the time I collapsed on top of him, his shaft and knot still buried deep inside of me, I felt like someone had scrunched me up and wrung out every last ounce of pleasure in my body.

It was fucking incredible.

His arms closed around me, holding me close as his knot pulsed inside me. "I love you, Blaine. My mate."

My chest swelled with pride at the words as he kissed my forehead and I snuggled in. "And I love you, Rohan," I replied quietly. "My alpha."

His laugh was husky and sexy and if he didn't stop being so damn hot, he was going to get me all worked up again. Then I remembered. Now was as good of a time as any... "There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Hmm?" His voice was groggy. Good.

I was absolutely rotten. "I think we should stay here."

"For how long?" he asked with a yawn.

"Forever."

That got his attention. He looked down at me, sobering immediately. "This isn't some random thought, is it?"

My face turned warm.

"Well, it's just that the pack is happy here and Vera is already talking about staying," I began. My well-rehearsed speech was out the window along with my composure. "It's beautiful here, and I know there are bad memories, but we've made a lot of good ones, too. We could all use a fresh start, and I just thought that maybe—"

"All right."

I blinked. "All right what?"

"We can stay, if that's what you want."

"We can?"

"You're the one who asked," he said with a laugh. "Are you so surprised I said yes?"

"I'm surprised it was that easy," I admitted.

He pulled me closer, nuzzling my neck. "I thought I'd lost you, Blaine, and there are things you don't realize until you go through something like that. Things you won't ever understand fully, because you're not an alpha. I made a promise to myself that night that if I got to you in time, I'd spend the rest of my life doing whatever it takes to make you happy. If staying here with the pack is what will do that, then I'll be happy here, too. You're my home. It doesn't really matter to me where we are, as long as I have you and the rest of the pack."

"Me, too," I murmured, stroking his hair. God, I loved this man. "Thank you."

"The idea of you running around in swim trunks all the time does have its appeal."

I snorted and gave his arm a playful swat, but he crushed me in his embrace and I soon fell asleep in his arms with the sounds of the sea as our lullaby. This was definitely a life I could get used to.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It took a month for the sale of the bungalow to go through, and half that before my grandfather joined us. He got off the plane wearing a straw hat, sandals with socks, and a Hawaiian print shirt straight from a tourist trap. He was enjoying his retirement from the snowy mountains, to say the least, and Birch had promised to help him build a stand so he could sell his art at the local marketplace.

The rest of the pack had settled into our new way of life just as easily. After living in the frigid forests for so long, they all had an even greater appreciation for the ability to run freely along the private beach and in the tropical growth that hugged our bungalow on all sides as far as the eye could see whenever they wanted.

We were the only wolf pack for a few hundred miles, but I couldn't imagine why. The easier pace of life was more than appealing. There was a college in the city about thirty minutes away, and I was thinking of starting classes there when the novelty of sitting on the beach and spending time with my pack—my family—wore off. So far, it hadn't.

Besides, something told me Vera would have plenty of odd jobs for me once she finished setting up her shop. She was selling crystals and spell books to tourists, but she had already gained a reputation among the locals for being able to do a fraction of what I knew she was capable of.

She seemed to be enjoying our new lifestyle, and even though she made cracks every now and then about "not being able to get rid of us," I could tell she was touched that we had stayed with her.

Now that the rest of the pack was free to do what they wanted, they had all blossomed to their full potential.

Aavai already had a job as a chef at a seaside restaurant, and I knew it would only be a matter of time before his perfectionism led him to start his own. Mattie had eagerly embraced the idea of taking college classes and wanted me to go with him. Birch was already going "stir crazy" and had decided to become a police officer, but I had a bad feeling that if he was expecting any high-stakes crime drama, he was going to be disappointed. Rohan said it would be good for us to have connections to local law enforcement when people inevitably started telling the same legends about the jungle outside our bungalow as they had started telling about the Hollows so long ago.

Sometimes I wondered what had become of those woods. The curse was lifted, but people's fear and

superstition had a way of taking on a power all its own. Only the sheriff knew the truth about the secrets they held, but his letter in response to the last post card I had sent him promised that he wasn't going to tell a soul.

My life in Tendale felt so far away, especially now that all the best parts of it were here with me, starting a new chapter. Each day seemed to bring some new excitement, but as long as they all ended the same, I was happy. My blood family's traditions had never much appealed to me, but there was something to be said for the ones Rohan and I had created for ourselves. Every night, no matter how busy we were tending to our pack, he would join me on the beach, and we'd watch the sunset.

The primary difference between wolves and humans was that humans watched the sunset and wolves watched the moonrise. I, for all my strangeness, was happy to enjoy both. I smiled as Rohan sat down next to me, leaning back to watch the waves.

"Met the local vampires today," he grumbled.

"Vampires?" I arched an eyebrow. "How'd that go?"

"Better than it could have. They live in the next town over. Their leader came over alone. He says he doesn't want trouble and he wanted to make sure we felt the same way."

"Do you believe him?"

"I do. We laid some ground rules. They don't hunt here as long as we stay out of their territory on full moons. I'm having Vera mark the boundaries tomorrow."

"Guess monsters aren't as uncommon out here as we thought," I teased.

Rohan snorted. "Guess not," he said, pulling me down onto the sand next to him. "Who're you calling a monster?"

I grinned wide. "My mistake," I said, leaning to kiss him. "No monsters here."

He hesitated. "Maybe we are monsters. You just made me realize that's not always a bad thing."

"That's why I love it here," I admitted, taking his hand as I laid my head against his chest and listened to his heart beat. "We can be whatever we want to be. As long as I get to be with you."

"You took the words right out of my mouth, with one exception—there is something else I'd like you to be."

I looked up at him, confused. "What is it?"

He looked down pointedly at my hand, tapping my left ring finger. "'Mate' is good, but 'husband' has a nice sound to it, too, since you were human most of your life and all."

A slow smile spread across my face and my heart beat faster. "Seriously? You're proposing to me?"

"It's not really a proposal without a ring," he said, nodding at something behind me.

I turned, tilting my head in confusion when I saw the sand castle a little further up the beach. It hadn't been there earlier. "What's that?"

"That's why I was late. I felt bad since you sort of signed up for this when I had a castle," he said, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

I got to my feet, wondering what he was getting at. "I like the bungalow better," I admitted, going up the beach to kneel in front of the sand castle. It was too perfectly detailed to have been done without the help of magic, and when I looked up over the hill, I saw Vera and the rest of the pack walking towards us with my grandfather in tow. They were all smiles.

When I looked back down, something glinted in the moonlight. I saw it there, a perfect golden band with tiny wolves etched along the inside, sitting atop one of the castle spires. My hands were trembling as I tried to pull it off without damaging the delicate sand sculpture. Rohan helped me to my feet, his eyes full of love and a bit of apprehension as he gazed down at me.

"I thought you'd want to have them all here."

All I could do was nod. My heart felt like it was going to burst.

"Well, give the boy an answer!" Vera called down the hill. "We haven't eaten yet!"

I laughed, looking up at Rohan. "The answer is yes!" Like it needed saying. Apparently it did, because the moment the words were out of my mouth, he pulled me into his arms for a crushing kiss that took all the breath out of my lungs. I melted and for a moment, I forgot we weren't alone.

My grandfather cleared his throat. "Save something for the aisle."

Rohan pulled away but held me in his arms for a moment, a knowing smile on his lips. "The honeymoon will be a private affair, I promise."

I couldn't help but laugh. Mattie was already bounding down the hill, tackling us both. Soon we were surrounded and they were all congratulating us. My grandfather was already reading Rohan the riot act as Birch gave him a playful shove and taunted him. Vera and Mattie were gushing over the ring, teasing me about how the pack was going to start expecting us to start thinking about the next generation soon, one way or another.

I wasn't sure how that would happen, exactly, since there probably weren't too many human surrogates eager to give birth to werewolves—or a litter of them—and adopting a human kid into a werewolf pack seemed like it would come with its own set of challenges.

Having a family of my own was never really something I had given much thought to. Neither was marriage, for that matter, but where Rohan was concerned, I found myself wanting things that were entirely foreign to me. Foreign but wonderful, just like the place our pack had chosen to call home.

In that moment, as we were surrounded by the people who loved us most with all the best things in life ahead of us, I finally understood what being a pack meant. Why they had all chosen to stay together even after being stuck together for so long. Why wounds as deep and dark as a vengeful curse could seem to heal overnight.

A pack wasn't just a group of wolves who hunted together, but it wasn't the kind of family I had known, where love was conditional and contingent upon fulfilling other people's expectations. It was something deeper than that. It was a bond that sometimes included blood but was never restricted to

it. The force that united us was the pull between the ocean and the moon, drawing you home no matter how far apart you were. It was a lover's heartbeat, sure and steady, a pair of arms wrapped around you through the night with the promise that you'd be safe when morning came, no matter how bad the darkness got.

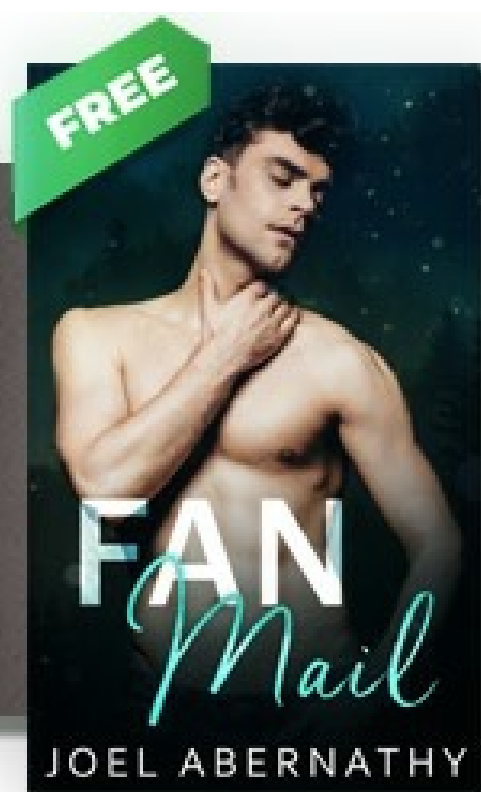
Our pack was home.

The End.

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